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THE BOY RIFLES; or, THE UNDERGROUND CAMP.

BY ARCHIE C. IRONS.



THE RECONNOITER.

The Boy Rifles;

OR,

The Underground Cam.

A Romance of the Red River of the North.

BY ARCHIE C. IRONS.

CHAPTER I.

A RIVER RACE.

"WELL, Fred, part, at least, of our dream is realized, for we are 'In the Land of the Dakotas'—are actually standing on the banks of that famous, romantic stream, the Red River of the North."

The speaker, Albert Arlington, stood balancing himself on the crest of a rock, and gazing off over the bright sheet of water that lay below, and that rippled along in the bright, morning sunlight, seeming to sing a song of welcome to the two boys standing on its banks; one with cap in hand, and his dark curling hair blown back from his forehead by the breeze that reached him in his elevated position; the other fair-haired and fair-skinned who leaned listlessly against a tree a few feet below, seemingly oblivious to everything save the river flowing at his feet.

He was not over sixteen, and his face still held its boyish look, and was soft and smooth as a girl's. Though his dress was not rich, it was strong and durable, and was fancifully ornamented with strips of colored fur. The belt about his waist which confined his clothes, so as to show his lithe, sinewy form in all its perfectness, held a handsome silver-mounted revolver, belt size, and a buckhorn-handled hunting-knife, in a neat sheath, was in close proximity to it. On the other side was a light hunting-hatchet with the handle through a loop attached to the belt. In short, from the cartridge-box at his side to the double, breech-loading rifle in his hand, he was a boy's ideal of a "full-rigged" hunter.

His companion's voice aroused him, and turning, he clambered up the rough sides of the rock till he reached the crest.

"Yes; and it's more magnificent than anything I had dreamed of. Look at that big, steep rock on the other side. It's straight up and down, and upstream from it are the cosiest woods imaginable. I'll bet you there's no end to the deer that hide in them," and Fred's boyish face grew animated as he thought of the grand fun in store.

Now that they stood close together you saw what a wide difference there was in the two. Their dress was similar, and their accoutrements identical. Albert was twenty-one years of age, and was half a head taller than Fred. His complexion was clear and ruddy, and his face manly without. A very slight mustache, jet black in color, ornamented his upper lip, but the rest of his face was cleanly shaven. The two made a handsome picture against the dark background of green.

"I wonder where Ranty and Will are?" said Albert suddenly. "They'll be to camp before we are if we don't hurry up."

The wind breezed up strong as he ceased speaking, swaying the trees across the river till their tops fairly danced in the bright sunshine. And at the same instant the distant report of a rifle came to them from up the stream.

"There!" exclaimed Albert, suddenly. "That must be they, now! And it must be Ranty, himself, for he said he was going that way on his own hook."

"No it ain't," said Fred, decidedly. "I know the crack of Ranty Hazelton's gun better than that. Nor it wasn't Will, either. I'll bet you it's Indians. You know that old trapper at the settlement told us we'd see more Indians than anything else if we came off up in here."

The young man did not reply to his companion at that instant. Something had come on the air that sounded like a faint shout. He could not tell for certain, it was so far off and indistinct, but his ears did not deceive him, for a moment after it was repeated, followed by a second rifle-shot, and a perfect chorus of shouts that seemed to echo from bank to bank, and from bend to bend of the river, till it finally died away among the hills.

The boys looked at each other in bewilderment for a brief second, then Fred said:

"It must be Indians, Albert. What if they should see Ranty and Will? Hark! hear them shout! They are coming down the river, too!"

"Yes, and we must get out of this. Do you see that thicket right above us here, that almost overhangs the bank? That will be a capital place to hide and we will be where we can see."

With one accord the two sprung down from the rock, and ran with the fleetness of deer along the brow of the bank. When they had gone a hundred yards, they reached the thicket and halted.

The bank here was very steep, and from where they stood it was nearly one hundred feet to the water's edge. A perfect network of scrubby cedars, lined it from top to bottom, and scarce a ray of sunlight could pierce their thick, green foliage. At the brow of the bank was a thick cluster of small pine and white-oak trees, and in this the boys halted.

"We've got a good view from here," said Albert, peering out from between two low-limbed pines.

"We can see the river, over the tops of these cedars, till it gets almost under us. They are certainly coming down it, and we'll soon see who and what they are."

The shouts continued at intervals, and each time seemed nearer than before. The boys lay quiet in their hiding-place, and watched and waited. While they could command an unobstructed view of the river for some distance, it would require a keen eye to detect them, screened as they were on all sides by the thick foliage.

The shouts grew plainer and plainer. The boys strained their eyes to catch the first glimpse of the comers when they should appear. They were evidently following down the river and were yet some distance off.

Albert drew himself up among the limbs of one of the small pines to enable him to see over a low, bushy tree-top that overhung the river on the point of a bentsome distance up. He had been up there but a moment when Fred heard a muttered exclamation from him, and looked up. Albert was shading his face with his hand, and his black eyes were intently fixed on a point above where Fred could see.

"What is it?" he asked in a whisper. "Do you see them?"

"It's Ranty, as sure as you live!" answered Albert, excitedly. "He's coming down the river in a canoe, and a-paddling as if the Old Nick was after him! There he comes; see?"

As he spoke a light canoe rounded the river bend, and came swiftly down-stream. It contained but a single occupant, a boy, and he was paddling, as Albert had said, as if the "Old Nick" was after him. He was near the center of the stream, which at this point was nearly two hundred yards wide, but as he approached he swung off toward the opposite bank as if about to land.

"It is Ranty!" exclaimed Fred, "and the Indians are after him, too. See him! he goes like the wind! But where did he get the canoe?"

"It must be one of the Indians, I guess. Fred, we must let him know we are here! He's getting almost opposite us, but he's going to land on the other side. I'm going to climb this tree, and signal to him!"

Reaching his rifle to Fred, Albert worked his way rapidly up among the limbs. Having reached a good position, he drew from an inside pocket, a jointed wipng-rod. Knotting his handkerchief firmly about the end of this, he put his hand to his lips

and blew a long, shrill whistle, and as it echoed across the water, he reached his arm out from the limbs, and waved the rod with the handkerchief attached.

The occupant of the canoe heard and saw, and with a single stroke of the paddle, turned his craft, and came scudding swiftly toward the high bank.

But before he had gone a dozen lengths a howling of hoarse voices came over the water, and round the bend scarce a quarter of a mile appeared a dozen canoes filled with Indians, that commenced rapidly lessening the distance that lay between.

Without a second's hesitation the boy whirled his canoe, and put back toward the bank at the spot where he had first intended to land.

In ten seconds his canoe struck, and springing out he sent the boat adrift, and with a defiant yell that echoed clear and long among the hills, he disappeared in the thick woods.

"Great Heavens!" exclaimed Fred, "he is wounded! Did you notice how he limped as he went into the woods? Albert, he will be overtaken and killed! Oh, if we could only get across and help him!"

A chorus of blood-chilling yells from a score of dusky throats, echoed along the river as he spoke.

Albert slid down the tree with a white face.

"Heaven help him, Fred. The Indians have found out that he is wounded. We must get across now, if we swim!"

CHAPTER II.

THE FIRST SHOT.

THE two boys looked at each other for a moment almost undecided. But it was for a moment only. The next they were bounding along the brow of the bank down the stream. Suddenly their eyes caught sight of the canoe Ranty had set adrift.

"Fred," said Albert, decidedly, "we must get that! There is a bend in the river right below, and a mass of drift-wood in the curve. See! the canoe is already bearing toward it! If we can get there in time, we can catch it!"

The boys strained every nerve as they flew along. The bend was fully three hundred yards down-stream from where they were, but they reached it some distance ahead of the boat. The friendly cedars had screened their flight, and now the point of the bend hid them from the view of the savages.

The light, birch-bark structure came dancing down the stream, the current steadily bearing it in toward the bank.

Albert ran out on the furthest point of drift-wood, and made ready to grasp the canoe as soon as it should come within reach. So engrossed was he, and so fearful lest the frail craft should get by him, that he did not look around, but of course supposed Fred was close behind him.

The canoe whirled around in the eddy made by the drift-wood, retreated, balanced on a tiny wave, then swung in a little nearer. Albert held his breath. The current was very swift immediately below, and he laid his rifle across some solid pieces of drift-wood and prepared to jump, should the canoe fail to come within reach.

But, as if it had only been acting thus to tantalize him, without really meaning to escape, the birch-bark swung further in and the next moment was rocking gently on a little spot of still water, its side grating against the huge jam of wood upon which Albert was standing. The young man could scarcely repress a cry of satisfaction as he reached out his hand and grasped it firmly by the prow.

"Jump in, quick!" he said, in a low voice. "We haven't an instant to lose!"

There was no response, and for the first time he glanced behind, and over the drift-wood. His companion was not in sight!

"Fred," he called, in a subdued voice. "Fred Carter. Hurry, for Heaven's sake!"

Still no response. A complete wall of foliage and vines overhung the water's edge where they had just

come to in, and rustled and swayed in the wind, which was now blowing quite strong. But no sound betrayed that any one was near.

A sudden fear took possession of Albert. What could Fred have stopped for at such a time? With a powerful pull, he landed the canoe high and dry on the drift-wood, and catching up his rifle, bounded across from log to log, till he reached the shore.

As his feet struck the bank, the sharp whip-like crack of Fred's rifle, within a dozen yards of him, brought him to a sudden stand, and the next instant a savage, with a howl of pain, sprung from behind a tree and disappeared in the thick woods.

"Run!" exclaimed Fred, as he came in sight and started for the canoe. "There may be more close by!"

Albert understood without further words, and in a moment they were both in the canoe, paddling rapidly toward the other shore.

"I saw him just as we were starting out on the drift-wood," said Fred, changing his position for one a little nearer the prow. "You were a little ahead, you know, and he didn't see me at all. I crept behind two big trees that grew close together, and I could peek through and see him plain as day. He was waiting for you to get still long enough for him to shoot. But I had a bead on him from between the trees, and I could have shot him before he could you. Then when you started back he got further around behind his tree, and I couldn't see anything but his arms."

"And there's where you hit him!" exclaimed Albert.

"Must have been, I guess. When he raised his gun to shoot, I let fly at his elbows. My! but how he yelled! One of his arms was dangling at his side when he ran off, so I know it was broken."

The boys reached the bank, and springing out, they drew the canoe up under some low bushes, and then started up the stream in the direction where Ranty had landed, bearing stealthily away from the river as they advanced.

The wind, by this time, was blowing steady and strong, and in the same direction they were going. The shouts had long since died away, and amid the soothng of the wind through the branches the report of a rifle would have been almost indistinguishable two hundred yards away.

The ground grew higher as they advanced, and the timber less dense. They had gotten out of sight of the river and were ascending a rocky slope, when some sound on the air caused them to pause.

"It was surely something," declared Albert, standing on tiptoe to look over a huge log that had fallen down the hill. "And it sounded from in front. Did you hear it?"

"Yes," answered Fred, "but I couldn't tell what it was. Maybe it was Ranty calling."

The bare suggestion seemed to strike a chill to both their hearts. Standing close together, they listened for what they dreaded to hear—Ranty's well-known voice calling for help. But they heard nothing, and had started on, when Fred caught his companion by the arm.

"There! did you hear that?" he said, in a low voice. "It was some one calling for help!"

Their hearts fairly stood still as they listened. Yes, it came again; but it was not a call for help. It was a shout, half-angry, and wholly commanding, as they could tell by the tone. The words were not distinguishable, but the sound came from directly ahead, and without a word, the two boys moved cautiously in that direction.

They had gone but a short distance when the timber suddenly ceased, and they came to a rocky, precipitous hill, that a glance showed them would be impossible to scale.

"We must make to the right around it," said Albert. "There must be an open spot of low ground ahead, for away across yonder are the tops of trees that are almost on a level with where we stand."

Albert took the lead and a few steps brought them

to a thicket of low brush that grew along the foot of the rocky hill.

"We shall have to go through this. I guess it won't appear so thick when we get fairly into it." And Albert shifted his gun from his shoulder to his hand, and commenced picking his way along, followed closely by Fred. It proved even thicker than they supposed, but they had gone but a short distance when they "saw daylight ahead," and a moment after, they halted, and parting the bushes, peered carefully out.

One good, long look; then Albert drew back, with a white face.

"Look, Fred," was all he said.

CHAPTER III.

RANTY GETS INTO TROUBLE.

WHEN Ranty Hazelton ran his canoe ashore at the termination of the river race, he had two plans in his head concerning it, one or the other of which was almost sure to succeed.

He knew of the bend in the river immediately below; and he reasoned that, should he set the boat adrift, it might mislead the Indians into thinking that he was still in the bottom floating along, or failing in this, it would be almost sure to go ashore at the bend, thus giving his two companions a ready means of crossing the river to come to his relief.

That the former plan failed by the Indians coming in sight around the bend, and that the latter succeeded, we have already seen.

With the spirit of mischief that was ever predominant in Ranty's mind, he conceived the plan of limping as he entered the woods, thus giving the savages the idea that he was wounded, never thinking that it would make them still fiercer on his trail.

But, the instant he was under cover of the woods, he straightened out with surprising quickness, and started at a breakneck pace in a direction almost parallel with that in which the river ran.

He felt comparatively safe now that he was under cover of the woods, for it was but a short distance to a spot where, if he could reach it in time, he felt sure, should the Indians hunt for a week, they would fail to discover him.

This hiding-place was a small cave that he had discovered that morning, and which opened on a narrow platform that jutted out from the face of a high precipice near the river. The platform was scant three feet wide, and was fully thirty feet above the ground on the smooth face of the perpendicular rock, which ran up from the ledge nearly thirty feet more.

Within half a dozen feet of this perpendicular wall grew a tall, slim tree that, denied the sunshine, had reared its brambly top some ten feet above the brow of the rock.

"Now, Mr. Randolph Hazleton, there's the tree that suits you better than any other one in these woods," exclaimed the boy, with his usual *sang froid*, as he came in sight of it. "You were fifteen years old a week ago, and much smarter than boys usually are at that age! ahem!—and if you can't climb that with fifty painted Indians to help you, when you have done it with nothing but your own legs, you hadn't better call yourself the great hunter of the Northwest."

He had strapped his rifle to his back while speaking, and with the agility of a squirrel, he commenced the ascent.

A strong limb grew from the tree about thirty-five feet up, and as if it had been calculated for that purpose, it was on the side next the precipice, and drooped slightly toward the shelf, thus forming a good chance for one with strong arms and nerves, to land safely thereon.

Ranty reached this without mishap, but here a difficulty arose which he had not calculated on.

The wind, which had been blowing steady and strong, had almost reached a gale, and getting a fair purchase upon the top of the tree above the rock, it

bent so far away that Ranty was unable to get upon the ledge. Again and again he slid down the limb, hoping a lull would come, that would allow the tree to swing back for a second. Once or twice it did sway almost within reach; so near that Ranty had prepared to jump, when a sudden gust would bend the slender body a full dozen feet away.

The loud shouts of the savages, now but a short distance away, warned the boy whatever he did must be done at once, or they would be upon him.

Dropping his body under the limb, he hung suspended by his arms in mid-air, and strove by swinging himself back and forth to incline the tree nearer the precipice.

But it was a futile attempt, and relinquishing it, he started to climb up among the thicker branches, when the Indians burst into the open space beneath the tree.

With a silent prayer, Ranty remained motionless, hoping they would pass along without seeing him. But one of the savages, keener-eyed than the rest, detected his clinging form, and a moment after a din was raised that would have shamed Babel.

Ranty saw that he was discovered, and for a moment a deathlike feeling came over him as he thought of the many stories of prisoners who were burnt alive by the savages. He threw it off with a powerful effort of will, and determined, now that he was really in for it, to put a bold face on the matter. Though he was well armed, he saw he could do nothing, and so he sat calmly on the limb and awaited his fate.

"Hey!" yelled one of the foremost savages who seemed to be a sort of petty chief. "We got you little boy tight. You no go up tree 'gin, hey?"

"Well now, you can bet I will if I've a mind to!" returned Ranty, sitting down on a limb and swinging his feet leisurely.

"You little brave, we make you git up an' git right smart," continued the chief, who had evidently been among the "noble white men," judging from his talk. "What—name—hey?"

"Randolph Hazelton, *Esq.*," returned Ran'y, promptly, continuing to swing his feet in apparent unconcern.

The Indians all stood around beneath the tree, a silent party to the confab, having yelled to their satisfaction on first coming up. They saw that their game was nothing but a boy, and they were somewhat astonished at his make-believe indifference.

"You come down—heap quick!" exclaimed the chief, stepping up close to the roots of the tree.

"Hey?" returned Ranty.

"Come down!" reiterated the chief, in a loud voice. "Me shoot!"

"Trade?" exclaimed Ranty. "Hav'n't got anything except an old jack-knife!"

"How—you?" yelled the chief, fairly black in the face. "You come down—me shoot in little big piece bits!"

He raised his gun threateningly, and Ranty saw that he had gone as far as would be advisable under the circumstances. So he commenced to slide slowly down the tree.

His heart beat like a trip-hammer as he thought of the perilous position he was in. Half-way down the tree he stopped on a short limb, and with his left arm thrown round the trunk, took a second survey of the savage group waiting for his descent.

There was fully a score of them altogether, some naked to the breech-cloth, and all daubed with paint; a motley-looking set, with fierce, savage, brutal faces. Ranty's heart fairly forsook him for an instant.

"You come—quick!" exclaimed the chief.

"Don't you be in a hurry, old leather-head," retorted Ranty, just savage enough to be reckless, as he saw there was no possible chance of escape. "I've got a lame leg, here, and I can't come very fast!"

And with this, Ranty thought necessary "fib," he again started to slide slowly down.

CHAPTER IV.

THE PICTURE WRITING.

As the day advanced, the wind seemed to increase. Now and then a scattered cloud trailed across the sky; the trees waved and creaked, and ever and anon one was snapped in twain and came crashing to the ground.

Standing upon a high point of land where a small stream emptied its waters into the Red River was a boy sixteen or seventeen years of age, and it needed only a glance at the dark, serviceable dress trimmed with fur, the double breech-loading gun, and the belt with its revolver, knife and hatchet, all the very counterpart of those worn and carried by Fred Carter, to show that he was "one of the four," the Will Macdonald spoken of by his two companions, Albert and Fred.

He had started with Ranty from camp that morning, but they had separated shortly after leaving it, with the agreement that they should meet at this spot and return together.

"He's gone on some wild-goose chase or other, and don't know that it lacks only an hour of noon," muttered Will, looking off up the river as he spoke. "Here I've been half an hour if I have a minute, and I was late, and he hasn't put in an appearance yet."

He put one hand to his lips, and whistled shrilly on his finger, but there was no answer.

"I sha'n't wait any longer, anyhow, for I'm as hungry as a wolf. I'll drive a stake here, and leave a cartridge shell on top of it, so's he'll know I've been here, and won't wait for me, and then I'll go for camp."

It took but a short time to arrange this, and then picking up the brace of partridges he had killed, he started.

His course lay directly up the small stream which, where it emptied into the Red, was perhaps a dozen yards wide. A brisk walk of two miles, and then he came to a sudden halt.

The land was low here, and the timber extraordinarily thick and large. The boy looked about him a moment, as if at almost a loss as to his exact "location," then he turned back from the stream.

"I came very near passing by," he thought; "but everything looks just like everything else here, anyhow."

After going a few rods, he came to a monster sycamore, with a hole burnt out of its side, from the ground up nearly four feet. This had been "enlarged and improved" and a slab from another sycamore fitted in for a "door." This Will removed and entered.

This huge sycamore was a mere shell, nearly as large on the inside as on the out. One or two holes were cut through higher up to let the light in and allow the smoke to escape. Various things were scattered about, but no sign of any of the boys.

"Well, that's odd, anyhow," mused Will, as he built a fire on the remains of a former one. "They must have found more game than I did, or some of them would have been here before this."

He prepared a dinner ample for himself and his three companions, and waited long and patiently for their appearance before he decided to eat without them.

"I should like to know what keeps them," he thought, half-aloud, as one o'clock came and the boys were still absent. "I believe I shall go back by the river where Ranty said he was going when we separated this morning."

He started off in that direction. As he neared the river, he struck the wide, fresh trail left by the savages.

The boys had been in the country but a few days, in truth they had only come to this present place the day before; and as yet had seen no sign of Indians, notwithstanding what the old trapper had told them at the settlement, and boy-fashion, they had thought but little about them, their minds being fully occupied with something else. But here in the soft

ground was the plain impress of moccasined feet, and the small, mule-like track of a drove of Indian ponies.

"Shades of Jupiter!" Will muttered, as he examined them. "It's been a party of Indians, as I'm a sinner! Can it be possible—"

He broke off suddenly and commenced a re-examination of the tracks. Long and patiently he searched, but the prints of no other feet, save those already discovered, rewarded him. He followed along the trail, but had gone only a few yards when he heard the rapid hoof-strokes of galloping horses.

"Somebody's coming, or I don't know what a ridden horse travels like," he muttered, glancing back in the direction from which he had come. "I guess I'd better sit down and rest me for a few minutes!"

And with this bit of facetiousness, Will darted into the thick undergrowth and took up a position where he could watch the trail.

An instant after two savages, mounted on fleet ponies, came galloping along.

They passed the boy's hiding-place like a flash, but a dozen yards further on they came to a sudden halt and sprung from their seats to the ground, and commenced examining an object, which up to this time, had escaped Will's notice.

It was a short stake driven into the ground near the center of the trail, and into a split in the top, made by a light blow from a tomahawk, was drawn a piece of white-birch bark, perhaps a foot square.

It was this piece of bark which had attracted the Indians' attention. Will saw them detach it from the stake, and examine it critically, turning it this way and that, looking busily, and almost excitedly at times, as they seemed to discover something new upon its face.

At last one of the Indians straightened up, and drawing his hunting-knife from its sheath, said something to his companion, and started at a half-trot directly toward where Will was hiding.

"You old sinner!" muttered Will, irreverently, squeezing himself into the smallest possible space, and loosening his revolver. "I don't know what you want, but if it's anything of me, I'll try and accommodate you."

The boy began to think he *did* want him in good earnest, for the savage came within two yards of him before he halted. But he appeared utterly oblivious of Will's proximity. He was intently eying a birch tree at the foot of which he had stopped, and after he had satisfied himself as to the best spot from which to strip a piece of bark, he commenced the operation.

It seemed to Will that the savages must hear the thumping of his heart. It sounded to him as loud as the puffing of a steam-engine, and when the red-skin would step around still nearer to him as his work would occasionally require, it would rise in his throat, till it nearly suffocated him. Twice he thought he was discovered, and started to raise his revolver, when the next act of the savage would reassure him.

At last the workman seemed to have gotten a strip that suited him, and with a guttural exclamation of satisfaction, started back toward his companion.

The latter had returned the piece of bark to its original position in the top of the stake, and then the two sat flat down on the sward and commenced a drawing of some sort upon the new strip.

Will nearly stretched his neck off in his efforts to watch the proceeding, but it was very little he saw, so closely were the savages bent over their work. At last they seemed to have arranged it to their satisfaction, for they placed it beside the other on the stake, and mounting their ponies, set off on the trail at a breakneck pace.

Will waited till they were a safe distance away, then he ventured from his hiding-place, and approached the stake. He detached both pieces of bark, and again proceeded to his hiding-place. Then

he spread the largest piece upon his knees, and proceeded to examine it. But after a five minutes' scrutiny, during which his face underwent the test of the severest scowls, he had failed to advance a jot toward understanding the picture before him.

At the right-hand corner of the bark were drawn in outline twenty-four Indians, as was shown by each one wearing feathers in his hair. In the front ranks of these was a smaller figure wearing a hat, and carrying his arms full of something—what, Will could not make out. These were all facing one way. Close behind them was marked out a stream with a smaller one emptying into it. In front of them were burning four small fires, and still a little further in front and up, some birds were flying in the direction of some mountains at the left of the picture. Just at the base of these mountains was a small stream that emptied into the main one at the extreme back of the picture. Near, and a little above one of the savages' heads, was a round disk, and about his feet, and extending nearly to his waist, was a cloud of dust or smoke.

The other strip was smaller, and contained much less drawing. On it two Indians with horses' ears in place of their own, and they were following a wide, plain trail. Behind them, near a stream, was a third Indian in a sitting posture, and upon each side of one of his arms was placed a stick, a thong going round the whole. From his mouth to the ears of the two Indians was drawn a line.

The only remaining thing in the picture resembled a square sheet of paper, with a lot of hieroglyphic-looking characters thereon.

These pieces of bark Will rolled up carefully and consigned to his pocket.

"It's my opinion, whoever that was intended for, won't get it, unless they get me along with it, which I presume they wouldn't hesitate to do if I gave them a chance. I've a great mind to follow along the trail a ways. I guess, if I keep my eyes about me, I can see Indians as soon as they can see me."

This resolution grew stronger in Will's mind as he pondered it, and finally he determined to carry it out. He didn't go boldly out in the center of the trail but kept under cover of the bushes, sometimes making quite *detours* to do so, however; but he had decided not to give any savages who might be following a chance to come on him unawares.

He had not proceeded more than half a mile in this manner, when he came to a spot where the trail led through a thick streak of undergrowth.

At the edge of this he stopped, electrified by hearing voices. A moment's listening convinced him that they were Indians.

With a cat-like tread, he entered the brush, and picked his way carefully along in the direction from whence the sound proceeded. A few steps brought him to the edge of the trail.

Dropping upon his hands and knees, he crawled along a few feet further, till he had attained the shelter of a prostrate log, then raised slowly till he could peer over the top.

Within a dozen yards of him were two savages; the identical two he had seen a half-mile further back.

They had both dismounted from their ponies, and one of them held in his hand a bit of paper, as Will could plainly see from his hiding-place. It resembled a leaf torn from a memorandum or account-book.

"Now what in all that's wonderful are they doing there, and what have they been doing ever since I saw them before?" wondered Will, in astonishment. "At the rate they went off, they could have been ten miles away before this, and I only wish they were! Hello, the other one is going to have a hand in, too! Wonder if it isn't some more of their hieroglyphics?"

The other Indian now took the paper and turned it over, upside down, and in every other conceivable shape, keeping up a continuous talking and gesturing

meanwhile. Then he tore it in two pieces and let it sail off on the wind.

"I'll have a look at that, or my name ain't Will Macdonald," thought that young gentleman, as he watched where the paper caught and hung in a thorn-bush. "That's right, old jabber-boxes; mount your ponies, and travel!"

The latter part of this soliloquy was addressed to the departing Indians. When the last clatter of their horses' hoofs had died away upon the wind, the youth came out and picked the bit of paper from the thorn-bush. It was genuine writing-paper, and Will's eyes grew round as moons as he saw that some words were penciled on it in Albert's handwriting.

"Here's something that amounts to something! Now if I can only find the other piece. It went off here somewhere."

He stepped along a few feet past the bush. Yes, there it was sure enough, lodged against a little tuft of grass. With fingers that trembled in spite of himself, Will picked it up and fitted it to the other piece. It read as follows:

"Ranty is taken prisoner by the Indians. We think they are going to take him toward the mountains—perhaps to a camp on Beaver Creek. We are following to see. If you come across this to-day, come on—if not, wait." ALBERT AND FRED."

CHAPTER V.

THE BOYS ON THE TRAIL.

A WILD, tempestuous, gloomy night was settling over the Red River country. From horizon to horizon stretched a dull, gray mass of watery-looking clouds, that went scudding before the blast, ever and anon spattering big drops from their tattered edges in their flight. The wind soughe*l* dismally through the darkening forest, and shrieked, and moaned and howled around the hilltops and over the naked prairies, as if the spirit of "Old Nick" himself had taken possession of it—a night in which the campers-out of the Red River country looked to make everything doubly secure before they turned into their bunks.

Standing under the woods, on an elevated piece of ground that overlooked a densely wooded valley were two motionless figures who paid not the slightest attention to the fierce threatenings of the coming storm. In the every instant deepening darkness, it required sharp eyes to detect them from the tree-trunks among which they stood.

But suddenly there was a slight motion on the part of one of them, a warning "Sh," and the next instant the spot where they stood was unoccupied—the figures had vanished.

At the same moment a shadowy shape flitted among the trees a few yards away, and that also vanished!

Vanished but to reappear an instant after, an upright motionless form, so close to a giant tree-trunk that it seemed a part and parcel of it in the darkness.

"If I didn't see something or somebody then, I'm grandly mistaken, that's all," soliloquized Will Macdonald, for he it was. "Maybe they think I'm napping, but they'll find their mistake."

For fully ten minutes he stood there, his body motionless, but every faculty on the alert. Suddenly there came to his ear a sound which he was convinced was not made by the wind.

The darkness had deepened so rapidly that objects were not distinguishable half a dozen yards away. Will strained his eyes in a vain endeavor to pierce the gloom, and looked long and intently in the direction from which he fancied the sound had come. But no moving object came within range of his vision.

"Fred," said a low voice, which Will recognized with a start as Albert's, "Fred?"

"What you want?" responded Fred's voice from

out the gloom, and the next instant Will caught sight of a shadowy shape moving along.

"Boys!" he exclaimed, in a low, eager voice. "Boys!"

"Well, if this don't beat any thing I ever saw," exclaimed Fred, as the two came up. "That we should run across you here! It's too good luck to have come."

A dozen questions were asked and answered in a breath, as the trio huddled together under the tree. It was, indeed, a most fortunate encounter, and seemed little short of a miracle.

"Ranty is safe yet," said Albert. "The Indians are camped right close by. We thought you were one when we first got a glimpse of you ten or fifteen minutes ago. But, how did you happen to come on? You must have found our 'letter.'"

"I did," replied Will. "And you can just consider that I have done some tall traveling since that, too, to be here. I took a regular Indian trot about half the way. I found where they'd camped at noon, and saw some more of your 'sign' there. I went to the sycamore for dinner, and haven't had a mouthful of anything since."

"Well, here," returned Albert, fumbling about in the dark to get into his pocket. "Here's some roasted rabbit done up in a piece of birch-bark. It's one we cooked this noon."

"E pluribus!" cried Will. "And now, while I eat, I want to hear all about the whole thing."

They seated themselves on the gnarled roots, and while Will munched his meat, Albert related all the particulars of Ranty's capture that they knew.

"They'd got him when we first come in sight of them, after we crossed the river," Albert continued, shifting his rifle to a new spot across his knees. "They had his hands tied behind him, and they were jabbering away like a flock of geese. We thought first, of going to the sycamore and waiting for you, and then we thought if we did they would get so much the start of us, that, like as not, we couldn't follow the trail. They didn't have horses for all of them to ride, or we couldn't have kept up. And it turned out that Ranty wasn't wounded at all. But he pretended he was awful lame, and so they put him on a horse with one of the Indians. We haven't been here but a few minutes. When we came up and saw the Indians were preparing to encamp, we commenced skulking round to find a good place, where we could see what the Indians were doing, and be hidden ourselves."

"That's precisely what I was doing," declared Will. "I knew you boys were somewhere here, of course, but I didn't expect to find you so easy."

They held a consultation to see what was best to be done. At last they decided, now that it was so dark, to separate, each going in different directions, and find the best spot for concealment close to the camp.

Albert went directly forward, while his two companions turned, one to the right and the other to the left. Albert, being older, had been looked upon as a sort of leader since first coming into the country, and in the present case the two boys looked to him for counsel, and coincided with the plans he proposed. After cautioning them to use their utmost vigilance, he moved away in the darkness toward the camp.

The night was almost inky by this time, save when the faint flashes of sheet-lightning illuminated the sky for an instant. The Indians had chosen a sheltered spot under some broad-topped trees, where, in the little open space they had pitched their camp and were busily cooking their supper over the fires they had blazing in different places.

Step by step Arlington crept up, the wind drowning the slight noise he made, till at last he had attained a position within a few yards of the nearest fire, around which half a dozen savages were squatting.

From here he could command a view of the entire camp. Ranty was near one of the center fires,

bound tightly, but looking as unconcerned as if no such things as bloodthirsty Indians were within a dozen miles of him. His hands were released to allow him to eat the supper brought him, but were tied again when he had finished. After a rather protracted survey of the camp, the young man crept silently away to meet his two companions at the place agreed upon.

They were both at the spot, and after some consultation, they all crept forward in a body, yet with the greatest caution, to the place Albert had so recently vacated.

"Well, if they ain't an admirable-looking set!" muttered Will, peering between the leaves of a thick, scrubby bush. "Where's Ranty? Oh, I see him. He looks as sober as a deacon."

"I guess you would if you were in his place," whispered Fred, "expecting to be roasted by a slow fire when their mighty lordships could spare the time from gormandizing."

Huddled together under the thick bushes, the trio talked over their plan in the lowest of whispers. But, had they made double the noise they did, it would not have reached the savages, above the sooughing of the wind.

"My plan is this," announced Albert. "In all probability it will rain before very long, and this will still further favor us. When the camp gets quiet one of us must manage to enter it in some manner. They may leave one or two of their number on guard, but I think we can get over that difficulty. We are all well armed, and I trust, have pluck enough to stand quite a fight if worst comes to worst. Ranty must be liberated, and to-night, too, for we don't know what may happen to-morrow. If we can get him loose, and get ten yards the start, what can they do toward finding us on such a night as this?"

"Not anything of course," answered Fred. "Why they couldn't see two feet, and the wind blows so they couldn't hear us run. I'd risk them catching us."

"And I, too," responded Will.

"That's settled then. So all we've got to do now is to wait."

"Which ain't very hard work for me," returned Will. "I've tramped so much my legs ache. Hello! Now what's up?"

The last part of his sentence was caused by seeing the chief approach Ranty with the latter's double rifle, which he had taken possession of that morning. He knew something of breech-loading arms, but not of this pattern, and he desired a little information.

"What matter wid gun, eh! He no good. Went this morning—no go now. You fix 'im."

"There isn't anything the matter with it," answered Ranty, composedly. "It's the best gun you ever saw, but it won't go for you. It don't like you. I shouldn't be surprised if it should bite. You better let it alone."

"White boy great fool—big chief mus' have gun—you no fix him, he fix you."

Ranty meditated. He did not think he stood in need of any "fixing," but he decided that he should not explain the working of the gun, unless obliged to do so. He changed his mind, however, on second thought.

"Untie my hands and I'll fix it," he said.

The chief complied, but Ranty's plan of escape was suddenly foiled by the Indians gathering in a circle around him.

"I'd try it anyhow, if I thought the boys were 'round," Ranty muttered to himself, as he withdrew the empty shells and inserted the cartridges the chief handed him from the belt. But in all probability the boys were not near him, and he decided to await a more favorable opportunity.

"But you can just make up your minds I'm going, old greasy-heads," he soliloquized, when he again found himself bound and sitting on the ground. "And that before long, too!"

CHAPTER VI.

RANTY HIMSELF AGAIN.

THE night seemed to grow darker; the camp-fires blazed cheerily, and fanned by the wind, sent out a ruddy glare upon the wall of foliage surrounding the little glade.

The three boys never left their covert, but lay silently waiting for the camp to become quiet. The rain held back strangely. Now and then a few drops pattered on the leaves, but none fell of any account, and one by one the Indians wrapped themselves in their blankets and composed themselves for sleep.

"Boys," whispered Will, excitedly, "they ain't going to leave a guard, as sure's you're born! There's the last red imp rolling himself in his blanket, now!"

It was even so. Will crawled round where he could get a better view. Ranty, bound hand and foot still, was given a blanket and made to lie between the chief and another Indian, who laid a little apart from the rest, by a separate fire. The chief took the precaution to attach a cord to Ranty's ankles, the other end of which he tied about his own.

A total silence fell over the camp, save the noise made by the roaring and rushing of the wind. An hour before midnight the rain commenced falling slowly, but kept increasing, till when midnight came it was storming quite hard. The fires were beginning to die out.

"Boys," whispered Albert, "now is our time. If it rains much harder the Indians will begin to look for some kind of shelter, and our chance will be over. Follow me, and tread light."

With the greatest of caution the boys crept round to where Ranty lay. It was only by the faintest flicker from the fire that they could mark the spot.

Arlington had assigned to himself the task of entering the camp, and with directions to his two companions as to how they should proceed, should he chance to be discovered, he cautiously advanced.

Inch by inch, sometimes so slowly that he seemed to stand almost still, till at last he reached a spot within a yard of the sleeping trio.

Their lying a little apart from the rest favored him. He glanced back where he had left his companions. Their forms were shadowy and indistinct, though less than a dozen yards away.

He glanced around on the sleeping Indians. All were quiet, and stooping forward slightly he touched Ranty's shoulders.

Slowly and cautiously, Ranty raised his head, till his eyes rested on Albert. The latter held his hunting-knife in his hand. One glance, and Ranty understood, and then he commenced slowly and quietly to remove the blanket. The next instant the cords that bound his wrists and ankles were cut, and he arose softly to his feet.

Not a word had been exchanged between the two. Ranty's rifle lay by the side of the chief, and the belt hung near. Albert had already secured the latter, but when Ranty stooped to pick up the rifle he found the chief's hand was resting on it, even in sleep.

Slowly and cautiously, and with bated breath, the boy began drawing it forth. The savage stirred uneasily; rolled over, and with a low, guttural "ugh," started to rise to a sitting posture.

Started, but never finished. With the quickness of light Ranty caught the rifle by the barrels, and using the weapon as if it had been a spear, dealt the chief a blow in the temple with the sharp, iron-bound corner of the butt-end of the stock.

Without a sound—without even a struggle, the chief fell back upon the sward, and lay like one dead.

With bated breath, and loudly-beating hearts, the two stood motionless, their eyes fixed on the remaining savage. He moved a little, drew his blanket closer about him, and then lay quite still.

Their hearts revolted at the thought of killing the miserable savage. But if they left him, he might

recover before they were a dozen yards from the spot.

Suddenly a way out of the difficulty suggested itself to Ranty. He motioned to Albert to take the chief by the shoulders and he would by the feet, and they would carry him away.

At that instant Will, who had, with Fred, witnessed the whole, glided up. It was but a moment's work to give their guns into his charge, and then, lifting the insensible form of the chief they bore it toward the edge of the glade.

It was their only way. Should they be discovered they could drop their burden, and stand a good chance of escape then. But, fortunately, they reached the cover of the woods without mishap.

Once here Fred assisted them, and in a short time they were several rods from the camp.

"All right, boys," exclaimed Albert, in a low tone. "This is far enough. Now to fix him."

"Here's the thong fast to his ankle yet," responded Ranty. "And it's just the thing. I'll put a gag in his mouth, while the rest of you tie him up."

Albert wound the thong firmly about his ankles, reserving a short piece of it with which he tied his hands behind his back.

"You old heathen!" muttered Ranty, wrathfully, as he tugged away at the knot behind the chief's head. "I'll miss my guess if you'll be in a condition to screech very loud when I get you fixed. I hope you'll catch cold, and it will settle in your big toe and make you lame for life."

"Come, Randolph, you're getting wicked," put in Will, soothingly. "You should remember to 'do to others,' and so forth. You know it's much better to give than to receive."

"That's just exactly what I mean!" returned Ranty, giving the gag a vicious pull. "I'd like to have him come to about fifteen minutes, till I could thrash him as much as he has me. I'd enjoy giving it a good deal worse than I did in taking it! I'll bet he'd remember it as much as a week, too! There, you red budget of paint and feathers. I'd give something to see you when you come to your senses!"

"He'll be like the Jew in 'Morna Mem,' his thoughts will be too sacred to speak aloud," responded Will, as they fixed their charge in a partly sitting posture against the roots of a tree. "Good-bye, old fellow! Happy dreams!"

"Now then," said Albert, "to get as far away before daylight as we can. The wind is southeast. We will take our course by that."

They moved off in the darkness, Albert ahead. Ranty recounted his adventures, and asked and answered questions all at the same time. He was elated, as were all the rest, at his escaping from the savages so easily, and with all his arms and equipments safe.

"I was going to try getting away to-night," he said, clambering over a log that he had run plump against in the darkness. "You ought to have waited and given me a chance to have covered myself with glory."

"You have already," said Will. "But oh, Ranty, what if we *shouldn't* have succeeded in rescuing you? What would have become of us? We never could have gone home."

Ranty was a little sobered by this view of the case and trudged along in silence for a few moments. But his thoughts soon took a new turn.

"My! but they won't swear nor anything when they find out all about it!"

"Swear!" said Fred. "Pooh! Indians can't swear!"

"They can't, eh? That shows all you know about Indians. That chief would swear you all to pieces in less than two minutes," returned Ranty, backing up and concluding to go around a tree instead of through it. "You just ought to have heard him!"

"I thought you looked rather smaller than usual," remarked Will, "but I didn't think before what made it."

The boys trudged on in silence after this. In the intense darkness they made but slow progress, and the wind and rain were additional discomforts. They had reached a strip of low, heavily-timbered land, and now and then little streams, swelled to twice their natural size, would bar their way, but generally a friendly log furnished them the means of crossing. And so they tramped on, eager to put as much land as possible between them and the savages before morning should dawn.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FURTHER DOINGS OF THE QUARTETTE.

"THAT'S just as I expected," said Ranty, tartly. "I might as well have staid among the Indians, for I shall smash myself all to pieces, anyhow."

"It was me you ran against that time," said Albert, as Ranty stopped to adjust his cap, and rub his shin.

"Well, it's all the same," returned Ranty. "First a log, and then a tree, and then you. I'm pretty near drowned, too. There ain't one of you wet, is there?"

"Oh, no, only a little damp, is all," answered Will facetiously. "I vote we stop somewhere, and wait till morning."

"Let me carry one end of that opinion," returned Ranty, "and allow me to congratulate you on it as being the most sensible thing you've said to-night."

"I don't know but it is the best thing we can do," said Albert. "But we want to find some place where we will be more sheltered than here."

"All right," returned Ranty. "Scatter out, boys, and look for a turned-up root or a hollow log."

They "scattered out" accordingly, and each began a search on his own account. Ranty proved to be the most fortunate, for he discovered a spot where they could all be sheltered from the storm. It was nothing less than an upturned tree that had, in growing, spread a mass of fine roots over the top of the low, soft ground, and when uprooted, had carried a portion of the ground up with it, and the edge, lopping over, formed a tunnel almost high enough for the boys to stand upright, and giving ample room for them all to sit.

"Shouldn't wonder if there was a bear in there," averred Ranty, fumbling in his pocket for his match case. "I'll pull him right out by the ear, if there is."

"Yes," returned Will. "If you should hear one in there even, you'd run like a locomotive going down grade."

Ranty had gotten on the leeward side of a tree and succeeded in striking a match and igniting a roll of birch-bark. And with this held above his head, he piloted the boys "indoors."

"This is a much better place than we expected to find, boys," declared Albert. "It's almost as cozy in here as our sycamore."

"Which shows the necessity of having a person along who amounts to something," put in Ranty. "But I don't expect anybody'll appreciate me till after I'm dead. That's always the way with geniuses."

The boys collected a quantity of wood, and soon had a bright fire blazing. And then they gathered around, and proceeded to wipe out and examine their arms, and dry their clothes. They were completely sheltered from the wind and rain, and soon the fire made everything pleasant.

"If we only had something to eat now, we should enjoy ourselves finely," decided Fred. "I'm going out to kill a partridge, as soon as daylight comes."

"Which won't be very long. It's four o'clock now," returned Albert, looking at his watch.

In a little while the gray dawn began to appear. Fred, accompanied by "Macky," as they sometimes called Will, started out to look for a brace of partridges for their breakfast. They came upon a pair and killed them before they were a dozen rods from their camp.

They made a very good breakfast for the four

hungry hunters, and before the windy, cloudy morning was fairly born, they were *en route* toward the sycamore.

They reached there without mishap, and found everything safe. The rain of the previous night must have obliterated their trail up to their stop under the root, and the boys had but little fear of the Indians finding their retreat that day, and they prepared to take the rest they so much needed.

The hollow in the sycamore was nearly six feet in diameter, which gave room for two of the boys to sleep comfortably, and have a fire at one side. For the accommodation of the other two they had arranged a "bunk" just above their heads by setting four posts and laying some small poles upon them, the whole covered with bark and leaves. This was the resting-place of Masters Ranty and Fred.

"Help! fire! murder! thieves! Jupiter Pluvius, wake up!"

Ranty thought he was in the center of a hundred locomotives all screaming at once, but by dint of rubbing his eyes a sufficient length of time he discovered only Will Macdonald standing on the side of his "bunk," holding a formidable strip of bark threateningly over his head, and yelling at the top of his lungs.

"Wake up! Who's asleep, I'd like to know?" returned Ranty, clapping his hands over his ears and coming to a sitting posture with considerable dispatch. "You'll tear this whole human habitation right down if you yell any more like that. Why, I could have heard you if I'd have been in Canada!" and Ranty put on a deeply-injured look.

"I wish you had have been, then! I've screeched enough to rouse the seven sleepers, and here you snored right along just as regular as the puffing of a steam-engine. I sha'n't be able to speak for a week, I know."

"What would you do if the Indians got you, say?" was Ranty's pertinent inquiry, as he clambered over the edge of his bunk. "You'd have to talk then, or they'd thrash you till you couldn't see!"

"I'd risk 'em! Didn't you know supper was ready? You stare as if you never saw any victuals before."

"Venison!" exclaimed Ranty, in astonishment.

"Of course," answered Will, holding up a tempting slice within a foot of Ranty's eyes. "Don't you wish you had some?"

"You see," explained Albert, coming in at that moment with Fred, "I was out scouting round a little this afternoon, and ran right over this fellow, almost. Will put a piece to roast as soon as we got him up here."

"And prime it is, too. It will fairly make your mouth water. Let's commence on it, for I am as hungry as it's possible for a well-regulated youth to be."

"You'd have thought he was if you'd have been in here and heard him howl," said Ranty, as the quartette gathered around their bark table. "I couldn't have made such a terrible screeching as he did, if I had gone without victuals for a week."

For a few minutes after this the boys were content to rest talking, and confine their energies to the "matter" before them.

"My appetite isn't very good," remarked Fred, at last, as he added another rib bone to the pile by his birch-bark plate. "But they say living in the woods tends to improve one in that line, so perhaps mine may come in the course of time."

"Mine is poor, too," concluded Ranty, looking wistfully at the rich, juicy slices, that remained uneaten. "But I never like to eat very hearty; it's apt to bring on dyspepsia. I guess I'll go to bed now, I don't feel very well," and Ranty drew his face down to a formidable length.

"Oh, pshaw, Ranty; don't give up so," urged Albert, helping himself to another slice. "You haven't eaten hardly anything!"

"I'll do for this time," answered Ranty, getting

up with an audible yawn. "I'll go out and be getting some wood."

The darkness fell over the forest at last, shutting out everything from view with its inky mantle. The boys' fire blazed and crackled cheerily, lighting up their genial faces as they gathered around it, a happy, contented group.

They had all been companions from childhood; had lived and attended school in the same town. Their tastes were similar; all loved the woods, and although Albert Arlington was twenty-one, he enjoyed the companionship of the boys as well as though they had been of his own age. He with an other young man had planned an expedition to this Red River country, and the parents of the three boys, his present companions, had consented to their accompanying them. Then, when everything was ready, Arlington's companion failed to keep his promise, and gave up the enterprise. Rather than disappoint his younger companions, Arlington carried out the original plan, and the opening of my story found them snugly ensconced "in the Land of the Dakotas," the game-abounding "hunter's paradise of a country," about the Red River of the North.

They had taken pains to arm themselves with the same make of weapons and accoutrements throughout, and, add to this the simplicity of their dress, and as far as outside appearance went, they were certainly very much alike. Ranty, rollicking, good-natured, fun-loving Ranty, was the life of the company. There was never anything stupendous enough to surprise him; never anything serious enough but what he could find as apt words for it, as would be spoken by much older people; never any scrape desperate enough but what it had its jokable side; and never anything enough provoking to mar his sunny temper for any length of time. And his three companions had equally commendable traits.

Will had produced the picture-writing he found the day before, and the boys examined it long and earnestly about the fire. But they had even a less clew to work on than the reader, and they could not solve it connectedly.

An hour after Ranty climbed up to his bunk.

"I don't think much of such a house as this," he remarked, as he reached the top, and "shed" his cap upon Will's head, knocking that worthy youth's beaver down over his ears and eyes. "There isn't any place to lay anything at all!"

"Well, you needn't take me for a shelf," returned Will, with asperity. "And I'll bet you two to one, you won't never have as good a house as this, for this is original, if it isn't very large."

"No it ain't, either," returned Ranty, poking his head over the side of his bunk. "I've heard of people living in hollow-trees before. Sneak had a good deal better one than this."

"Sneak? who was he?"

"An old hunter and trapper that lived off West. But go to bed like a good boy, now, and don't ask questions," and Ranty sunk back from view.

Arlington was already rolled up in his blanket, and Will took Ranty's sensible advice, and rapidly ensconced himself in another, and the four "inhabitants of the sycamore," as the last-mentioned youth facetiously termed himself and companions, were soon sound asleep.

It could not have been far from midnight when a shadowy form glided stealthily along, and, approaching the sycamore, halted at one of the openings made to admit light, and peered cautiously in.

There was no sound save the heavy breathing of the tired sleepers. The fire had died down, till only an occasional fitful flicker came from its embers, throwing dancing shadows over the recumbent forms.

Long and intently the keen eyes peered about, then the face was withdrawn, and the shadowy figure moved silently around to a second aperture, where it could obtain a better view of those within.

CHAPTER VIII.

▲ TREACHEROUS GUIDE.

OVER a beautiful, undulating country, made up alternately of prairie and forest, and that lay seventy miles southward from Fort Garry, three travelers, mounted on strong, good-conditioned horses, were galloping leisurely along.

The first, whose age claims the precedence, was a small, wiry-looking individual, with a thin, straggling beard, covering a still thinner pair of cheeks, and a bony chin. His features were small, and the eyes, which were small also, were deep-set, and more remarkable for a cruel, crafty expression than aught else. He carried a rifle across the saddle in front of him, and the belt about his waist fairly bristled with weapons. He was known as "Warner" by all those who knew anything about him, and he claimed to be a trapper and fur-trader, occasionally acting as guide to parties going overland from Fort Garry, a position which he was now filling.

His two companions, riding abreast, and a couple of yards in the rear, were both young girls, yet very unlike. One was perhaps nineteen, with a pure, fair, beautiful face, brown eyes, and a profusion of nut-brown hair, very light, and whose flossy little curls and waves glimmered golden in the sunshine, as the breeze lifted them from the graceful shoulders. Her form was womanly and perfect, of medium size, and she sat on her splendid animal with the ease and assurance of one to whom the saddle was a familiar seat. Her name was Madge Lennox.

Florrie Stanley, or "Flo," as she was familiarly called, who rode beside her, was perhaps fifteen years old. Her form was slender and graceful, but had not yet attained its womanly fullness. Her complexion was dark, yet very clear, and her eyes were bright and large, and fairly bewildering, in the frank, straightforward way she had of turning them upon you. Her horse was similar to her companion's, and in the holsters of the saddles were revolvers, while, in addition to these, each carried a tiny, silver-mounted one in the dainty belts that encircled them. Each wore serviceable traveling-dresses of brown cloth.

This, with the pack mule managed by the guide, comprised the party, and their equipments.

The two girls had been somewhat suspicious of their guide since starting, and almost wished they had not undertaken the journey; but they were in a hurry to reach Georgetown, and had accepted his proffered services, he assuring them that he was familiar with every foot of the route, and that they, under his guidance, could pass unmolested through the country, as he had great influence among the different bands of Indians, having been among them very much in his trading trips.

"Flo," said Miss Lennox in a low tone, as they fell a little further in the rear, "what do you think of our guide now?"

"I think he's outlandish!" returned Florrie, decidedly.

"Yes, but what about? He is gentlemanly enough in his actions and conversation."

"That's just the trouble with him," returned Flo, adjusting her dainty little hat, "he is too much so! When such a looking codger as he turns saint, there's mischief brewing. Have you noticed how glum he has been for a few minutes though?"

"Yes; he acts as though he was looking for something. But I have noticed ever since we started, that he appears different from what he was at the fort; something in his whole air, but nothing that you can get any tangible hold of. If we were safely through the Indian country, I wouldn't care."

"I wouldn't either; and I don't much as it is," and Flo touched her revolver significantly.

At this instant the guide suddenly halted.

They were going over a gently undulating prairie, dotted here and there with clumps and streaks of timber. A mile or more ahead, and a little to the right, was one of these clumps, and from it a horse-

man emerged, and came galloping swiftly toward them. The guide's eyes were fixed upon him as the two girls reached his side.

"And who do you think that is, Mr. Warner?" asked Miss Lennox, as she reined up. "It looks like an Indian, doesn't it?"

"Yas; it is," replied the man, "and he's a-comin' right for us, too, but they ain't much use in runnin' for one Ingin. He's coming purty fast; guess I'll go forrad and see what he wants."

He gave the lariat attached to the pack-mule in Madge's charge and rode out to meet the new-comer, who was now not more than two hundred yards away, and who could plainly be distinguished as an Indian, mounted on a smallish horse; a cross between the mustang and pony.

The two halted within a few feet of each other, and exchanged a few words, then rode up close together. They remained in conversation several minutes, at the end of which the Indian got to talkin' and gesticulatin' excitedly. The girls could hear the words distinctly, but being uttered in the Indian dialect, could only guess at their meaning.

"He acts savage enough to eat any one," said Flo, as the two sat quietly on their horses and waited and watched. "What do you suppose they are talking of?"

"I can't imagine, unless it is something about us passing through," replied Madge, as she watched the motions of the two. "I wonder if there are not more Indians yonder in the woods?"

"I shouldn't be surprised if there was, and they have sent this one out to investigate and report. What's going to be done now, I wonder?"

At this juncture they saw their guide pull one of his revolvers from his belt, and riding up close to the savage, present it to him. The latter examined it closely, and then wheeling his horse, rode off toward the woods from which he had come. Their guide watched him till he was away some distance, and then returned to his companions.

"Well?" asked Madge, eagerly, as he rode up.

"It's all right, I guess, miss," returned the man, shifting his eyes uneasily from Flo's piercing glance. "This Ingin was one I knowed, or mebbe we wouldn't have got off so easy. He's camped with another one up in the grove and they'd 'a' nabbed you purty quick if I hadn't been along. He says they's a big lot of 'em off here a piece," jerking his thumb off toward the river, "an' he says they hain't no objection ter me going through, but that you war another thing. But I told him you was friends of mine, and I'd give him one of my revolvers if he'd let us go through an' say nothing about it to the other ones, and he said he would. So I guess we're safe enough. The revolver war an old one, and I didn't care much 'bout it, anyhow."

"Nevertheless, I think we had better pick our camping-ground to-night, in a spot as suitable for defense as possible," declared Madge, looking at her watch. "It is now five o'clock. Do you know of a good place that we can reach before dark?"

The man had his back to the two girls at that instant, fixing something about the trappings of the pack-mule, and it was well for their peace of mind that they did not see the expression that flitted over his face, nor hear the words he muttered under his breath.

"Yas, I know a tip-top place," he replied, after a moment's silence. "But we'll have to ride purty sharp to reach it afore dark. It's clus' to a stream that empties into the Red."

He turned round as he finished speaking, and remounted his own horse. And then, without more delay the whole party struck into a sharp gallop, heading directly for a long blue line several miles ahead, and which Warner informed them was the timber that skirted the banks of the stream on which he wished to encamp.

The sun was just sinking behind the hills, filling the whole western sky with crimson and gold, when the party drew rein on the banks of the little stream,

The latter was perhaps a dozen yards wide, and rippled along over a stony bed, with a musical sound. Its banks were low and well timbered, and the trio dismounted on a little point of land around which the stream crooked, and which was covered thickly with trees, about whose trunks a profusion of grape-vines slumbered.

"What a lovely place!" cried Flo enthusiastically. "It is just splendid! How I wish we could stay here a week!"

"And live on roasted rabbit and fish, *a la Indian!*" laughed Madge. "I should prefer to have a little civilization mixed with it."

"Miss Florrie likes the woods," said the guide, looking admiringly at Flo, who was swinging airily from a grape-vine. "But what do you think of the ground here, Miss Madge? Ain't it a purty good place?"

"It appears like it," returned the girl, glancing around. "Or at least as good a place as we could find about here. The shape of the bank on the opposite side will preclude the possibility of any one crossing at this point. But I hope there will be no necessity for defense," and she looked inquiringly at the guide.

"Don't think there's the least bit," returned the man, busying himself about the erecting of a small tent, "for I don't think the Ingins will offer to trouble us any. But Ingins be queer sometimes, and it's best to be on the safe side."

There was apparent sincerity in his tone, but could Madge have seen the sinister glance he cast at them from his stooping position, she would have mistrusted him far more than she did. As it was, she was beginning to think she had misjudged him.

"I wronged him by mistrusting him, when there is no good cause for it," she thought. "But if his face did not so openly proclaim him to be a bad man, I should never have mistrusted him, for I have had no just cause from his actions. But, time will tell, and I shall not 'borrow trouble' about it, at all events."

Before the darkness had fairly shut down, everything was made secure for the night. The guide had erected a small tent, for the accommodation of the two girls; as for himself, a blanket, and a grassy spot under a tree, was all he generally cared about.

"We will have our arms more than usually handy, to-night, Flo," said Madge, as she examined her revolvers carefully. "And if we should be obliged to use them, we will. I think we could stand quite a siege."

"There mustn't any savages come poking round here, if they know when they are well off," proclaimed Flo, with a decided nod of her little head, as she peered out into the darkness, and then closed and secured the flap that served as a door for the tent. "We wouldn't think anything of exterminating a whole tribe."

And Flo, with visions of dancing savages before her eyes, and she making them fly right and left with her revolvers, crept up close to Madge, and in three minutes was sound asleep.

Madge lay listening to her breathing, and to the murmurs of the wind through the tree-tops, and wondering if they should get safely through this journey they had undertaken, until she, too, fell asleep.

She awoke sometime in the night to find that the wind had risen, and was blowing steady and strong. It roared through the trees so loudly, she was half alarmed, lest some of the unsound ones should fall upon the tent. But she conquered her fears, and composed herself for sleep. Little Flo's breathing was forgotten; the heavy roaring of the wind had subsided to a distant murmur, she was fast losing herself in dreamland, when she was suddenly aroused by the whinny of a horse.

At another time she might have paid no attention to it, but to-night the very air seemed to be pregnant with danger, to her. She had assured herself it was nothing but her own fancy, but she could not throw the feeling off.

At this instant the whinny came again, sounding longer and louder than before.

"That was Ned, I am sure," she thought. "I wonder what can be the matter with him? I have a great mind to go and see—and I will."

Rising quietly, so as not to disturb Flo, she took her revolver, and pulling back the curtain of the tent stepped softly out.

In the deep shadow of the woods the darkness was almost palpable. She paused an instant; then moved off in the direction she knew the horses had been left.

A few steps, and she paused beside Ned. He rubbed his nose against her shoulder, and whinnied softly.

"Why, Ned, what's the matter?" asked she, patting his neck. Did you think you heard something?"

The horse looked intently off in a certain direction, whinnied again, and pulled impatiently upon his fastening.

Madge stepped along to where the other horses had been left. To her astonishment she found them gone!

She looked further to assure herself she was not mistaken. A moment's search convinced her that she was not.

"Can it be possible that Warner has moved them?" she thought. "I will go back and see."

She rapidly retraced her steps to the guide's resting-place. His blanket lay on the ground, but he was nowhere about.

She stood irresolute for a moment; then she crept back to the horse.

She had reached his side, and had paused a moment, when she heard a step upon the leaves, and a voice, that she recognized as Warner's, said:

"Cuss you, anyway! Can't you be quiet a minute? You want to wake up them beauties, don't you, and spile all? I'd 'a' taken you first if I'd thought you's going to make a confounded fool of yourself. Whoa, now!"

There was a total silence for fully two minutes. Madge had sunk down, softly, at the first sound of the voice, and now she could see the guide's form, standing motionless beside the horse, and knew that he was listening.

"Guess everything's all right," he muttered, at last, taking the horse by the halter and starting along. "Tain't likely they heard him, the wind makes such a noise."

With a loudly beating heart, Madge arose, and followed him. The noise made by horse and man was considerable, but it taxed her utmost vigilance to keep them in hearing, and yet run no risk of betraying herself. A dozen yards, and the man halted.

"There you be, all safe an' sound, the whole on ye; an' I'll risk their findin' ye on sech a night as this. Now, if ye'll all keep quiet for twenty minutes the thing will be done."

The man muttered the words hardly above his breath, but they reached Madge. And the next instant he had moved away in the darkness, and disappeared.

The sound of his footsteps had hardly died away before the brave girl's determination was taken. She crept silently back, and entered the tent.

"Flo," she said, in a low voice, shaking her gently. "Flo!"

"What," answered Florrie, sitting up suddenly, broad awake. "What is the matter?"

"Don't be alarmed," returned Madge, "but gather up all our wraps, and put a couple of blankets in a compact bundle. We have got to continue our journey immediately, but we can't stop to take anything with us but what is strictly necessary. I will be back in a minute."

"Stop!" said Flo, catching her by the arm, "and tell me what the matter is. Has the guide gone, or are the savages coming, or wha'?"

For a moment the girl hesitated, and then, in as few words as possible, related to her an outline of what had transpired. After the first shock, Flo was

as courageous as she, and hurriedly commenced to prepare for the journey.

"Stay here till I come with the horses," was Madge's parting words, as she moved away in the darkness. She found no trouble in selecting her own and Flo's horse from the others, and leading them along, left them a few feet from the tent. And at the same instant Flo glided up, and stood beside her.

"I heard you, and thought if I came it would save time," she said, in a whisper. "I have got every thing you told me, and here is your other revolver that belongs in the holster. Are the saddles on?"

"No, but we must put them on. It will take but a minute. Here is yours."

With fingers that trembled in spite of the most heroic efforts, the brave girls buckled the girths, and prepared to mount.

"Hark!" whispered Flo, suddenly. "I thought I heard something."

Both sunk to the ground, and listened intently. There was a rustling of leaves, and then against the shining water were outlined a dozen dark forms, gliding directly toward them!

CHAPTER IX. A NEW-COMER.

"HELLO!"

Ranty had just waked up, and was deliberating whether to get up and replenish the fire, or lie still, and go to sleep again. He had about decided on the latter, and rolled over, and drew the blanket closer about him. Then he raised his head, and listened intently.

"Hel-lo!" continued the voice, in a little louder key.

"Hel-lo!" mimicked Ranty, poking his head over the edge of his bunk, and peering in the direction of the sound. "Who are you?"

"Look-a-here, young man; is this the way you use yer company?" continued the voice. "Ain't ye goin' ter let me in?"

There was a stir among the sleepers, and before Ranty could reply to this last appeal, Albert came suddenly to an upright position.

"What's the matter, Ranty?" he asked. "What are you talking about?"

"He's got the nightmare!"

It was the stranger's voice, and it sounded preternaturally solemn. Arlington sprung to his feet; Will followed him, with amazing celerity, and Fred sat upright and stared, in sublime astonishment.

"Company, boys, and he wants to come in!" exclaimed Ranty, jumping down and running to the door. Cautiously opening it a couple of inches, he peered out.

"Say, you sure there ain't any Indians at your back?" he continued, in a doubtful tone.

"Good Lord, no, youngster. They ain't a pesky critter of 'em in ten mile!" and a tall form loomed up in the darkness close to the door.

"All right, then; forward march," and Ranty swung back the slab that guarded the opening, and ducking his head, the new-comer entered.

Arlington had thrown a few sticks of wood upon the coals, and the fire blazed up brightly, throwing its light over the man before them. He was nearly six feet tall, fully equipped as a hunter, and a fur cap, with the tail of the animal as a tassel, on the apex of the crown, was perched on the back of his head. His face, what of it was visible, for a heavy beard covered the greater part of it, was honest, frank and good-natured in expression. He stood erect, in the firelight, and his blue-gray eyes had a rather amused expression in their depths, as he glanced from one to the other of the surprised youngsters.

"Wal, now, you didn't r'all expect to see old Abe Anderson comin' in to-night, did ye? No, I 'spect ye didn't! But that's allers the way in this 'ere world of ours," continued the stranger, dropping the butt of his rifle to the ground. "Suthin' 's allers a-turn-

in' up that a feller don't expect. Good Lord! I've went ter my traps many a time when I *knew* they wa'n't nothin' in 'em, an' jes' as like as not I'd find half a dozen squealin' beaver. An' then, ag'in, when I'd go out a-huntin', not 'spectin' to see anything, I'd kill a b'ar!"

The old trapper paused an instant, to glance around, but before either of the boys could reply, he continued:

"I s'pose I'd orter 'pologize for comin' in this way, but the fact ar' I had to make myself scarce this evenin' or I'd 'a' got my top-knot lifted. I got right onter about forty Injuns, an' they war jist old bizness on the run. And, you see, I war lookin' for a place to snooze in, when I see'd your habitation, an' thought I'd call."

"And you did exactly right," responded Albert, heartily, as he piled more wood on the fire. "We haven't much to offer in the way of accommodation, but you are doubly welcome to such as it is."

His companions expressed the same, and in five minutes they were all gathered about the fire, and the conversation was general. Ranty had put a liberal steak to roast, on learning that their guest had had no supper, and he watched it zealously, while he listened to the old hunter, who had lighted his pipe and was relating his recent adventure.

The fire sparkled cheerily. The traits and habits of the Indians, upon which the conversation drifted, was an interesting one to the young hunters, and the time slipped by unnoticed while they listened to the words that fell from the lips of the old trapper.

"You have spent a great portion of your life in these western wilds?" Albert asked.

"Yes—here, an' between here an' the Saskatchewan river. Some moughtn't like the life, but I do. An' in the woods one learns a heap that can't be taught him anywhere else, too."

"I have got something that I would like to show you," said Will; "and if you can explain it, we should like to have you, for we have all got our curiosity aroused concerning it."

He produced the Indian picture-writing as he spoke, and unrolling it handed it to the trapper.

"Wal, now, Uncle Abe, you'll have to open your peepers if ye read that," said the old hunter, as he took the largest piece of bark and spread it out on his knees. "Tain't very plain, I'll allow, for them that don't understand it, but I guess I kin make it out."

The boys sat round in silence, while he examined it minutely, taking long whiffs at his pipe meanwhile, having relighted it after finishing his supper.

"Wal, boys," he said at last. "They's consider'ble in that, and the way I read it is this: them twenty-four fellers is Ingins, of course you can see that; an' that chap with the hat on is a *white* prisoner. He's got his arms full of wood, which means he's to be burnt at the stake. This stream here, emptying inter the big one, is where he was took, an' that round thing over that Ingin's head shows where the sun war at the time. Them four fires means they'll eat four times afore the' reach the village, which are yender where them mountains is, an' which they're goin' straight to, 'cause, see the birds?"

The boys crowded around to examine it, and Will said:

"What does that dust mean that's about that Indian's feet?"

"By Jiminy! I hadn't see'd that afore!" exclaimed Abe, as he looked closely at it. "I know that feller, an' he's the very same chap, with the reds, that I run ag'in' ter-night. They call him some great long name, or other, that means 'He-who-goes-in-the-smoke.' Wonder where they got that feller? Did you find this lately?" concluded old Abe, turning to Will.

"Yes," answered Will. "And I can tell you who that prisoner is. It was Ranty, here, but we just pranced in among them last night and carried him off."

"Yes, and that fellow that goes in the smoke went in the rain," put in Ranty. "We give him a free ride into the woods, and tied him up. I guarantee he was in a beautiful frame of mind when he come to himself."

Old "Uncle Abe," as he styled himself, was anxious to hear the particulars of the affair, and was loud in his praise of the boys' bravery, at the conclusion of the narrative.

"They's good stuff in all you fellers to make prime Injin-fighters. Ye done that right up science. But I tell you what, boys, they's a heap of danger ter be run, in sich a life as a hunter an' trapper leads, off here. You'd orter had a man what knowed the ways of the country and the Ingins like a book to 'a' pilot-ed you 'round till ye got 'eddicated' a bit. An' if you take my advice, you v on't live in this concern long. The Ingins is ready for bizness now, an' they'll find ye less'n three days. You want ter git som'-where, where, if they discover you, you'll have a chance ter do som'thin'."

This advice, the common-sense of the boys told them, ought not to be disregarded; and the result of a conference was, that they decided to move as soon as daylight should come. A cave that Ranty had found, near the river, might be exactly such a place as they wanted. They would examine it, and see.

"But here is a little more hieroglyphics, that I was going to show you," said Will, producing the other strip of bark. "When I was hiding, two Indians came along, and after examining that piece, made this one and stuck up with it, for the benefit I suppose, of any more savages that might come along."

"Of course, that's what it war did for," said the old hunter, as he examined the piece. "I've come across piles on these pieces in different places. These two Ingins here, with horse's ears, are *mounted*, and that feller back there by the frog is a chief, Leapin' Frog. I've see'd him afore; an' that string from him to these, means he's told 'em somethin'. He's wounded, too, see his arm?"

"That is some of Fred's work," interrupted Albert. "He shot at him the morning Ranty was taken."

"But what does that square thing pictured on there mean?" asked Will.

"Was the two pieces of bark close together?" asked the trapper.

"Yes; both on one stake."

"That's it, then. It means th'is wounded feller has told these two, about what's on this big piece, afore they read it."

Ranty arose, and stretched himself with a sleepy yawn.

"I vote we go to bed again. I don't fancy this sitting up business very much, myself. I have to prop my eyes open, now, to see anything. Ouch!"

Ranty broke off suddenly, and began examining his foot with affectionate zeal.

"I don't fancy a stove that leaves coal all round the floor for unsuspecting youths to tramp upon," he muttered, *sotto voce*, as he climbed into his bunk. "And other degenerate youths who have a way of making light of other people's troubles, ain't much to my fancy either," and he made a grimace at Fred, who was laughing himself into a sideache at the comical picture he had presented.

But the night was waning apace, and the balance of the company took pattern by the example Ranty had set, and soon all was quiet inside the sycamore.

CHAPTER X.

THE UNDERGROUND CAMP.

THE first gray light of the early dawn found the boys astir. While one superintended the breakfast the balance were busy packing up their equipments in snug shape to carry.

"This makes me think o' one time I moved," said old Abe Anderson, rolling up a blanket with a camp frying-pan for a center piece. "You see they war

a lot of us, up on Bridger's Fork, when one night the pesky reds stole every hoof we had. Good Lord, you'd orter heard the boys swear! Soon's daylight peeped, every feller war ready for bizness; when 'long come 'bout fifty Injins, mustang-mounted, and they jist on lit us, an' we hed to skedaddle for cover. Then the pesky brutes would gallop out of sight, an' when we'd make a break, up they'd come ag'in. Then we'd make a stand an' fight, and back they'd go! And that's the way them varmints worked it, an' them fellers what stole our hosses, gittin' off further every minit. They wa'n't only half-a-dozen of us, but we could have chawed a hundred Ingins right up, if we could have got to 'em! But bless yer gizzard! They war mounted, an' we wa'n't, an' they wa'n't nary git there! We war all so mad that we turned black and blue all over! An' then we come a little *strata rem*, an' cornered a few on 'em an' got some hosses, an' then we's fer gittin' out after the fellers what stole our hoofers, an' then we happened ter think if we left our camp-stuff the other Indians would git it! Oh Lord! but what a time we had!"

"What did you do?" asked Ranty, as he served up the meat.

"Do? I reckon, youngster, you'd 'a' thought we done somethin', if you'd been there! We packed up our valuables, strapped 'em fast to our mustangs, and *moved*, bag and baggage! An' mebbe we didn't do it afore a jack rabbit could whisk his tail! He wouldn't have got it mor'n half round, *sure!* That's the beauty of not havin' much housekeepin' stuff; you can move in a hurry."

"Did you get your horses?" Albert asked, as the old hunter paused to look lovingly at a slice of steak.

"Be I a-eatin' this 'ere meat?" returned the trapper, as he began a rapid "jaw-attack" upon the steak.

"Yes," he continued, as he finished it, and leaned back with a satisfied sigh. "We got our horses, but we had a hard run."

They were all ready to start, at last. Each one had a goodly bundle, and the trapper had the largest of all. Ranty led them toward the cave he had found, in as direct a route as possible.

"It seems to me," remarked Albert, as they filed along, each keeping a sharp lookout for any signs of an enemy, "that there must be some other way to get into the cave, besides climbing that tree. Did you explore it any, to see what kind of a place it was, Ranty?"

"Not much," replied Ranty, shifting his load so it would pull on the other shoulder. "I happened to see the ledge, as I come along, and the tree was so close I took a notion to climb up, and see how it looked. And when I got up there, I found the cave. It must be quite big, for it looked darker than a pocket. I didn't care about examining the thing alone, so I thought I'd wait till we were all together. But I'll just bet it's a capital place."

"You remember, Fred, what a rough, rocky hill there is over it? The one we went around when we come upon the Indians the morning they got Ranty? Perhaps there's an opening somewhere on the top of that."

"We'll soon see," said Ranty, "shedding" his pack upon the ground, "for here we are."

"Where else could we oe, I'd like to know?" was the trapper's pertinent query, as he, too, deposited his load upon the ground. "I've often thought I'd like ter be able ter be in two places to once, but I never could yit. Good Lord! have we got to climb that?"

For Ranty had doffed his cap, and was climbing, with the agility of a squirrel, up to the ledge.

"I think there ought to at least two of us remain on guard here," said Albert, looking inquiringly at the hunter. "In case any savages should come along, we would be in a bad box."

"Spoken like an oracle," returned old Abe, approvingly. "A feller always wants ter be on the

safe side in case of happenstances, which are som'at common, if not more so, in Injin kentry. I'll stay fer one."

"And I, for another," said Will. "So you can 'ascend this noble monarch of the forest' as soon as you like."

"Tumble up!" roared Ranty, thrusting his head over the edge of the ledge.

"Pare off the northwest corner of your voice, or you'll have all the Ingins in the country atop of us," admonished Abe.

Albert now commenced the ascent, followed closely by Fred. "We'll be off a bit, an' if any Ingins put in an appearance, we'll let 'em chase us a piece, so you kin come down," called the hunter, as the two reached the ledge.

"Now," said Ranty, "to explore this wonderful and magnificent underground apartment, which the mysterious hand of nature hath wrought. Where's the torch?"

"Here," responded Albert, producing and lighting, one of several which he had prepared. "And don't 'drift away on the flowery paths of rhetoric' too much. It may turn out less magnificent than you think."

"Ticket number one!" exclaimed Ranty, enthusiastically, as they entered the cavern through a narrow aperture, that opened from the ledge. "Now what have you got to say?"

Albert held the torch high above his head, and allowed the light to flash around the apartment. It was about a dozen feet high and wide, and nearly double that in length, and walls, floor and ceiling were solid rock.

"Epluribus!" cried Fred. "If this isn't just the place, then where will you find it? Move along, and let's see what this is."

From the opposite end of the room, an irregular passage led off into the darkness, and wide enough, some of the way, for two to walk abreast. Through this the boys passed, and soon emerged into another cavern similar to the first. But from this, passages led in every direction, and some of them wide enough to form small irregular rooms. Upright pillars of rock, and sharp corners jutting out from the walls, or guarding turns, were everywhere, and the passages were constantly uniting and diverging, till it seemed as if the whole bank was fairly honeycombed.

"I vote we follow this 'lead,'" suggested Fred, indicating a passage that led a little up from where they were. "It seems to go straight ahead, and may eventually lead out somewhere. Hello! what's this?"

They had been advancing along the "monarch's hall," as Ranty facetiously termed it, when they suddenly came upon what appeared almost like a flight of stairs. There were no steps, but the rock was rough and uneven, and formed a secure footing.

"I guess you wish you hadn't said anything about my cave, now," said Ranty, triumphantly, as he clambered over a boulder, that reared itself in the very center of the stairs. "If you can get up any better cave than this, on so short a notice, I'd like to see you do it, that's all!"

"We'll own right up, Ranty," said Arlington, laughing. "It's a fabulous place without mistake."

"Hark!" exclaimed Fred, suddenly.

A subdued murmur came to their ears, distant, yet plainly distinct.

"That must be water!" said Albert, as they advanced. "Look out that you don't step upon nothing before you know it," he continued, to Ranty, who was walking ahead as if for a wager.

"No fear dwells within this breast!" responded Ranty, in a tragic voice. "My reputation is at stake, to produce a good cave here, and it must be done at all hazards. Halt!"

"What's up now, most degenerate youth?" asked Fred.

"Hurrah!" shouted Ranty, making a grab for his

cap to wave, but suddenly remembering that it wasn't "there." Daylight, as sure as you live!"

With one accord the three rushed forward, and the next moment stood in a spot resembling a disused cellar, with the blue sky above their heads, and the murmur of the trees sounding pleasantly in their ears.

For a moment there was a total silence, as the boys looked about them.

"Well," said Albert, at last, "if we had planned this ourselves, I doubt if we would have been as well suited with it as we are now. But the next thing is: Can we get back?"

"Let's climb up, and go 'round," suggested Ranty. "It can't be far."

After a little deliberation, they concluded to do so, but after fifteen minutes' "investigating," they found that they were not likely to "climb out" so easily as they had expected. The top of the hill, where they were, was so piled with rocks, and was so steep, that it was impossible to descend in any place.

"This is the only available spot I can see," said Albert, clambering upon a huge boulder, and looking over. "If we could once pass this I think we could manage to descend; but it is too high to jump from, and we have nothing by which we could let ourselves down."

"See here!" exclaimed Ranty. "The boulder is smaller at the bottom, and here is a flattish stone that fills the space between it and the rock. I believe if we could move this, we could crawl through."

The three exerted their strength upon it, and to their satisfaction, succeeded in moving it. It left an opening fully two feet square.

"Plenty of room," was the information Ranty volunteered, as he passed through. "And I think the rest will be easy."

It proved so; and making the descent, without difficulty, they, in five minutes, stood on the brow of the precipice, overlooking the spot where they had left their friends.

"Hello!" called Albert, in a subdued voice.

"Hey? Wal, by thunder!" and old Abe appeared from the copsewood, and gazed in astonishment at the forms of the trio ranged along the cliff.

"How in' tarnation Jerusalem did you fellers git up there, I'd like to know?" he continued, coming up to the foot of the tree, with Will. "'Pears to me you must have found a way through."

"We did," returned Ranty, promptly. "And it's a capital place, too, I can tell you! Swing up a little closer, old tree! I want to go down."

"Hold on!" exclaimed Fred, "you can't go down that! You'll break your neck."

"Will, eh? you wait and see," was Ranty's reply, and an instant after he had caught one of the topmost limbs of the tree that reached above the precipice, and sliding down it to the body, rapidly descended it till he stood on the ground beneath.

"Drat my moccasins, youngster, if you ain't *some* on the climb!" exclaimed old Abe, admiringly. "You'd make yer fortin' in a circus! Throw up trappin' an' huntin' an' go an' jine!"

"Oh, you can make fun of my climbing," returned Ranty, "but I guess you wouldn't if you had seen me when I was young."

"Fun? Good Lord, youngster! I hadn't the remotest *idea* of it! Sure's you're born! No." continued the old trapper, in a philosophical strain, leaning his elbows on his rifle, which lay across his knees. "I never make fun of anybody; it's ag'in' my principles. I knew a feller, though, once—Hello!"

"We thought, seeing Ranty had set us an example, that we would take the shortest cut," explained Albert, as the trapper broke off suddenly in his discourse, to glance at them as they struck *terra firma*.

"And accordingly, here we are," concluded Fred. They then proceeded to give the hunter and Will a detailed account of their discoveries. The former

gave it as his opinion that it would be the very spot they wanted.

"I war a stranger an' you took me in, you know, an' as I've kinder took a likin' fer ye all. I want ter see ye safely settled afore I say good-by," concluded old Abe, producing a strong cord from about his shoulders. "So I'll see ye housekeepin', an' then I'll moch-aw, as the Ingins say."

Three of the party now ascended the tree to the ledge, taking with them the cord. Once up there, one end of the cord was lowered, the packages fastened to it by those below, and so, one after another, the blankets, camp utensils, ammunition, and extra equipments were drawn safely up, and last, but not least, the provisions, including the remains of the buck Albert had shot the day before. Then the remainder of the party clambered up. They concluded to take the front cavern for their main use. It was quite difficult of access, would not be likely to be discovered by the Indians, and they could use the "back entrance" for coming and going if they thought best. And in case the Indians should discover them, they could retreat at the opposite entrance and get away safe.

It was nearly noon before everything was completed to their satisfaction. Meanwhile some of the party had discovered a shorter way to the opening on the hill, and had brought in a good supply of wood with which to make a fire. And it was as hungry, happy, and contented a lot of boy hunters as ever was that gathered about the steaming coffee and hot venison steaks.

"The only thing you lack now, boys, is some good hosses," said the old trapper, as he sipped away at the delicious fluid in his cup, while his honest face beamed all over with the good-nature that was characteristic of him. "I've got one what is one, up on a little creek further towards the fort. An' he'll be tickled nigh about tew death, too, when I git back."

"We fully intended to have some," replied Albert. "But we nearly gave up coming, when all ready, and then, when we finally decided to come, we had no intention of getting so far away. We will be wiser next time."

A bright thought seemed to strike the trapper, and he was evidently about to speak, but checked himself, on second thought.

"Wal, boys, keep a sharp lookout for Ingin," was his parting advice, an hour later. "I've took a powerful likin' tew ye all an' ye mustn't be s'prised if ye see me pokin' in among ye ag'in some day. I shouldn't be surprised myself."

"If you have 'taken a liking' to us, so have we to you," returned Albert with a laugh. "And rest assured, that whenever you can pay us a visit, you will be doubly welcome. So come often and stay long."

But little did either of them dream, as they shook hands with the old hunter, under what circumstances would be their next meeting.

CHAPTER XI.

A PAIR OF HEROINES.

It was a moment fraught with the keenest peril, to the two brave girls crouching there in the darkness, their eyes intently fixed on the forms of the stealthily-approaching savages. Trembling with excitement, Flo grasped her revolver tighter, determined, like the brave little Amazon that she was, to fight to the "last gasp" before submitting herself a prisoner, for it seemed impossible, now, to avoid a collision with the savages.

With lightning rapidity, Madge tried, in her mind, to devise some means of escape. They might possibly creep away in the darkness unobserved, but without their horses they would stand but slight chance of escaping eventually.

But to stay where they were, would be only giving themselves into the savages' hands, while a bold push might possibly result in their escape. By springing

upon their horses, they might take the savages so by surprise, that in the darkness they could elude them. Madge was on the eve of carrying this plan into operation, when a low voice, which she recognized as their false guide's, said something in the Indian dialect, and instantly the file of savages, now not more than ten yards distant, turned a little to the left in their course, and passing the shining background of water, were instantly lost to view.

"Now, Flo!" whispered Madge, excitedly, but low. "Spring upon your horse, and keep close to me. It is our only chance."

An instant after the two girls were in the saddle. But before their horses had stirred from their tracks, a warning cry arose from the direction in which the savages were.

"We are discovered!" cried Flo, as she struck her horse a sharp blow, for at sound of the cry of alarm Madge's horse had started wildly along.

"Keep close to me," called Madge, for she knew should they get separated in the darkness, there would be a hundred chances to one that they would be taken. And as she spoke a perfect pandemonium of yells arose on the still night air, and rushed in a body in their direction, while above the din sounded the guide's voice, yelling some hoarse command in the Indian tongue.

The horses reared and plunged wildly, and the two brave girls had to exert their utmost strength to keep them from dashing away at their topmost speed. In the intense darkness this would have resulted in their being dragged from their seats by the lower limbs of the thick timber. But Madge had noticed particularly the lay of the ground on coming in, and she chose a path out where she knew were the least obstructions. But their progress was not very fast at the best, and the yells of the savages sounded frightfully near.

"I do believe they are gaining, Madge!" cried Flo, in sudden alarm. "What—"

She broke off, and reined up her horse with a suddenness that threw him back upon his haunches. For, from the ground about them had sprung half a dozen dark forms, and were on every side of them in an instant. Two had grasped the horse Madge rode by the rein, while another laid hold of her to pull her from her seat. But with bravery that was a part of her nature the girl clung to the saddle. Swiftly the hand holding the revolver came to a level with the savage's breast, and with a silent prayer for help she pressed the trigger.

The flash and the report came together. By the light that for an instant illuminated the spot, Flo saw the savage clutch his breast with a spasmodic motion and fall heavily backward. But while the report was still echoing upon the air, a second one blended with it, and with a howl of rage one of the savages, who was grasping the rein, sprung back, his face distorted with agony.

Flo had cocked her revolver at the commencement of the *melee*, and sat holding it with a tenacious gripe, gazing spellbound at the scene. A low, guttural exclamation, and a strong hand attempting to wrest the revolver from her, brought her suddenly to a realization of her position. A strange cry, half of terror, half of defiance, came from her lips, and she clung to her weapon with the gripe of despair. It was discharged in the struggle, and the savage half released his hold for an instant, and before he could tighten it, Flo had jerked the weapon from him, and cocking it again, shut her eyes and blazed away.

She was conscious of a wild yell, following and blending with the report; of the sudden plunging forward of her horse; of a dark form rising before her, that was borne down and ruthlessly trampled under the feet of her frightened steed, and then she was going like the wind along a little, narrow flat, almost on a level with the water's edge, while Madge, just ahead, slackened her speed a brief instant till she came up. Then she was herself again, and they were flying along, their horses' feet ever and anon

plashing into the shallow water; while behind, a din reigned that would have shamed Babel.

"Are you hurt, Madge?" inquired Flo, anxiously, as soon as she could speak.

"No, but I am afraid you are?"

"No, I am not! But some one else is! I gave one savage the headache I'll be bound. But, oh, Madge, wasn't it a most fortunate escape!"

"It was indeed; but we are not 'out of the woods' yet. But I don't fear very much. We are better mounted, or at least as well, as they, and, thanks to our training, we have a little practical knowledge of riding and shooting, and I guess we have the courage to back them up," with a smile into Flo's flushed face.

"We gave them a sample of what we could do, to-night," returned Flo. "But, oh, my gracious! w at a mean old trumper that guide is! I'd just like to get my fingers in is hair! I'll bet I'd pull for once!" and Flo clinched her little hands, and her eyes flashed like little coals of fire in the darkness, just in anticipation of such an event.

"He has certainly turned out a scoundrel, and proved that our fears were well founded. But hark! we have outrun them completely."

They were still following the stream, the nature of the banks sometimes forcing them into it; but now they drew up for a moment on a narrow flat close to the water's edge, and listened. But not a sound came to show that they were pursued.

"I guess they didn't look for us to follow the stream, and have gone in some other direction. They can do but little to-night, anyhow, but I am afraid when daylight comes they will find our trail.

"Let them," returned Flo, spiritedly. "I think we are amply able to take care of ourselves. Ain't we Bessie?" and she patted her horse's neck caressingly.

They sat there for some time and listened for the slightest sound that would tell them their pursuers were upon their track, but nothing broke the stillness of the night, save the murmur of the wind through the trees, and the breathing of their steeds.

"I think we had better leave the stream, here," said Madge. "It is taking us nearly in an opposite direction now, from what we wish to pursue. The stars furnish an admirable guide; and I think we had better take our course by them."

"If they're not a better guide than the one we have had, I don't think they amount to much," was Flo's opinion, as she gathered up the reins. "But you are better fitted for a general than I, so take command, and march."

They struck off from the stream, and traveled forward as rapidly as they thought advisable, looking to the saving of their horses for a sharp run if it should be necessary. Flo's spirits seemed to rise still higher as no signs of the savages appeared, and though Madge, with more experience and a premonition of the trials ahead, which her years, if nothing else, told her they might expect, could not feel hopeful, she was careful to say nothing that would damp her companion's spirits.

And so the long night wore away, and the first gray light of coming dawn found them many miles from their camping-place of twelve hours before.

A suitable spot was chosen and a halt made. About the middle of the forenoon Flo, who was watching while Madge slept, saw what she thought to be a man, fully two miles away. It was so far off she could not tell for a certainty, and it only remained in view an instant. It was under the woods at the further edge of the plain or prairie before her, and in the direction of Red river. She awoke Madge and told her what she had seen.

"Whoever it was, I hope they didn't catch a glimpse of you, for it is not at all probable they would be friendly to us," said Madge, as she drew a small glass from her pocket and leveled it at the corner of woods Flo had pointed out.

The two girls were securely concealed by the undergrowth and thick timber among which they had

purposely stopped; and keen indeed must have been the eyes that, looking from the direction of the prairie, could have detected them.

But they were detected nevertheless. Under the drooping foliage of a giant tree on the outskirts of the clump of timber toward which the two girls' attention was directed, a man was crouching, his eyes intently fixed on the spot where they were standing. But after a long and patient survey with her glass, Madge failed to see aught that was the least suspicious.

"You can just depend on it, though, that there was a man there," declared Flo, nodding her head, by way of emphasis, till her curls all danced again in the morning sunlight. "And I shouldn't wonder at all if it was Whiskerando Brigando"—Flo's "pet" name for their false guide.

But it was not at all likely that the person or persons were friends, and so, the sooner they changed their present position for one further away, the less danger there would be of their encountering them.

With this view they at once got under way. Their course would carry them a little nearer the supposed enemy, but as they could travel under cover of the timber, they decided not to make any deviation on that account.

They had gone perhaps three miles when they again struck the prairie, which curved around the point of woods through which they had passed.

They were congratulating themselves on passing the danger in safety, when directly ahead of them, and appearing from behind one of the higher "waves" of the prairie, rode a single horseman. Madge's quick eye caught him the instant he came in view, and the two halted instantly. Then, as he reached the level ground, they saw that he had several led animals in tow.

"It's a white man, Madge!" cried Flo, after they had watched him a little. "Who knows but it may be the one I saw a short time ago?"

"It may be," answered Madge, who was watching him through her glass. "Whoever it is, it is *not* our guide that was, at any rate. What do you think we had better do?"

"Go and make his acquaintance," responded Flo, promptly. "Who knows but what he may be some one that we can get to guide us through? There be hunters and trappers here, and he is probably one. He is only one man, anyway, and I don't think we need be much afraid, let him be as ugly as old Whiskerando himself. Shall we, or sha'n't we?" and Flo stroked Bessie's neck, and waited for her companion's opinion on the subject.

"We had better go on," responded Madge. "He goes along as unconcernedly as though he had no idea that we were near."

But when the horseman came to the spot where he would have crossed the trail, had the girls been following one, he came to a halt, and waited for them to advance.

CHAPTER XII.

THE GIRLS' NEW GUIDE.

"WAL, now, by thunder!" muttered old Abe Anderson, for it was no other than the old hunter himself. "If I hain't run onter somethin' *this* time that don't 'habit the Red river country to any great extent. Lord! I'd e'ena'most think they war ghosts, if the hosses wa'n't stickin' up their ears so. They knowed in a minute they wa'n't any cheat 'bout them. What d'ye think 'bout it, Jimmy? Been some time since you've seen any gals, hain't it?"

Jimmy laid back his ears, as much as to say "Yes," but immediately stuck them forward again, to regard the new-comers, now but a few yards away.

"Mornin', ladies," greeted the trapper, slipping from his seat, as they came to a stand near him; while his eyes twinkled and a broad smile expanded his good-natured, weather-beaten face. "I'm Uncle Abe Anderson, I be, an' I was specially designed by Providence ter help all female critters what war in

trouble, which I can see is yer present circumstances, so, if I *am* a leetle rough on the outside, I'm ready ter set ye right, if anybody can," and the old trapper leaned on his rifle, while Jimmy stared with eyes and ears, as if he thought they might vanish at any instant and then began to paw, and champ his bits impatiently.

"Thank you," answered Madge. "We are, indeed, in trouble, and if you can help us, we will pay you amply."

"Oh, wal, I sha'n't charge you very much, seein' as you're wimmin—whoa, Jimmy; 'have yourself now! If ye can git me a nice marble house an' a hundred acres o' land in some big city an' give my gran'mother a few thousan' dollars ter make her last years kinder comfortable, an' make some li' der a treaty wi' the Ingins so's to have this Red river country ceded to me, for I can't trap an' hunt in any peace now, an'—"

Old Abe paused at the end of the last modest request and, with his eyes and the upper part of his face visible over the arch of Jimmy's neck, regarded the two girls with a beaming expression.

"I hardly think—" began Madge, hesitatingly, concluding that the trapper must certainly be crazy.

"Oh, wal, never mind!" interrupted Abe, as if he had suddenly changed his mind. "I guess, on the whole, such a service ain't worth much anyhow, so I'll guide yer where you want to go fer nothin'. My time ain't very valerble."

"Seems to me you have dropped amazingly on your terms," said Flo, regarding him quizzically.

"I begin to think," added Madge, "that that was a way you took to inform us you wouldn't charge anything. But we are willing and able to pay you a good price for your services."

"Don't talk about pay!" returned Abe, contemptuously. "Lord! I'd be the meanest man ever lived if I'd take pay fer helpin' ye out of a diffikilty. I 'spect yer guide's got killed, maybe?"

"No," answered Madge; and she proceeded to give the old trapper an account of their journey since starting. "My companion here is a cousin who lives with us in Minnesota, and the party whom our people expected we would return with from Fort Garry gave up coming at present, and as we were anxious to get home, we hired this guide, who was very certain that he could pilot us through safely."

"What fer lookin' chap was he?" asked Abe.

Madge described him.

"I know him," said the trapper, musingly; "or at least I think it's him. But his name wa'n't Warner then. I never liked him much, but I didn't s'pose he war a p'izen sarpint like that."

"Were you the person I saw at the point of woods over yonder?" asked Flo, indicating the spot in which she had seen a glimpse of the man.

"Can't say fer certain, but I war *there* and I see'd you, but you were so pesky fur off, I couldn't r'ally make out what you war; so I thought I'd strike in ahead an' make yer acquaintance."

"I don't see how you could have seen us," said Madge, in surprise. "I thought we were effectually concealed."

"A feller has to see all sech things or he don't sojourn in this kentry long," said old Abe. "Fu'st thing he knows some Ingin will be liftin' his top-knot. It's risky business not to keep yer eyes peeled here."

All this time the trapper had been busy revolving the case before him, in his mind. He didn't tell the two girls that the four led animals were horses that he had "borrowed" from the Indians. But such was the case, and he was now on his way with them to the cave, where he had left our four boy hunters. He had intended to push through, and reach it that night, but this had caused him to alter his plans materially. Should he take the cave on his route, and leave the horses? No; that wouldn't do.

"I war thinkin' how I'd manage some bizness I

had on hand," he said, removing his cap, and scratching with his fingers among his tangled locks. "I know where they's a safe place to leave my hosses, an' I've 'bout 'cluded to take 'em there. I can guide you through ter the settlements in a few days, an' then I kin come back an' git 'em. We're purty near the river, here. They's a place on the bank of it that I kin leave you while I take 'em away; then I'm ready for bizness."

The trapper led them to a high, timbered point of land on the river-bank, and with many injunctions to guard against discovery, he left them. It was now about ten o'clock, and he thought by three at the furthest he woul'l be back.

"Well, Flo," said Madge, as they were eating their lunch an hour later under the overhanging trees, "we have got a guide now, I think, that is capable and honest, and will take us through safely."

She looked down, and off over the country as she spoke. The river was visible, at intervals for two or three miles, its waters glistening silvery in the bright sunshine, as they rolled tranquilly along. But suddenly her eyes caught sight of what would always attract attention in such a country; a light column of blue smoke rising above the treetops that grew on the river flat a fourth of a mile above, and that were hardly on a level with the high point on which they were.

"If it should be Indians!" suggested Flo, breathlessly.

"And more than likely it is," responded Madge. "Who else would be camped there? It might be trappers, true, but it is not probable. It looks open there at the left of them. By creeping a little nearer the river, here, I think we can see them, whoever they are."

They attained the position without difficulty. The first glance confirmed their fears, for in the edge of the timber, were several white tents, and the score or more of dusky forms moving about, could be none but Indians.

The girls crept quietly back to their cover, and waited and watched for their guide's return. They kept close to their horses, so they could mount on the first alarm. But the hours passed, and no Indians disturbed them, though they saw several but a short distance away.

"If he would only come," cried Madge for the dozenth time, looking in the direction from which Abe must soon appear. And then her eyes wandered to where glimpses of the river could be caught among the hills.

"Flo," she said, suddenly, "there is a boat coming down the river! It must be more Indians."

Flo sprung up and joined her. The boat was plainly visible, though nearly two miles away, and was coming down the stream.

"It looks as though there was a load of them," announced Flo, shading her eyes with her hand, and scowling her forehead into a perfect network of frowns. "Wouldn't it be just lovely if they should tip over and get a good ducking?" she continued, thinking of the ludicrous in the midst of the dangerous. "Lend me your glass, Madge, and let me view them."

Madge drew the glass from her pocket and handed it to her companion. One look, and Flo uttered a little cry.

"White men! Oh, Madge, it is! it is! As sure as you live!"

Madge took the glass hastily. Yes, there could be no mistake. They were too far off to tell much concerning them, but their whole air and appearance bespoke them whites.

"Madge!" cried Flo suddenly, clasping her hands. "They don't know the Indians are there! They will all be killed! We must warn them of their danger!"

The two looked at each other a moment with white faces. Their own danger was forgotten now, when they saw others rushing so surely upon their doom. They didn't stop to wonder whether they

were friend or foe. They were white, and were unconscious of their danger; what was the best plan to warn them of it?

"We must make a *detour* and come to the river beyond the savages," explained Madge hurriedly. "And we must start at once, for there is not a moment to lose, if we want to be in time."

They sprung upon their horses, and dashed off down the slope. They made a half-circle about the Indians, keeping all the time a good half-mile of ground between them, and struck the river, a mile above where they were before. They had urged their horses at the top of their speed, and they were reeking with sweat and panting heavily. But it mattered little, if they were only in time.

"I will dismount here and creep forward," said Madge, as they reined up a few rods from the water's edge. "And you stay in charge of the horses. No," she added, on second thought. "You may go forward, and I will stay. It will be safer so. There may possibly be Indians near."

Before the words were fairly spoken, Flo had skipped from her seat, and was flitting forward like a water-sprite.

Madge kept a keen lookout about her, but failed to see the form gliding along through the copse-wood, and that halted a few yards from her. And all unmindful of the glaring, basilisk eyes upon her, Flo reached the water's edge, and peered through the overhanging branches. The next instant a little cry of thankfulness went up from her heart. Then she had sprung from the cover of the foliage to a huge stone that lay in the edge of the stream, and with her little form drawn up, her hair unbound and trailing in a golden shower behind her, her lovely face all aglow with excitement, was standing there waving her handkerchief with all her might; a glorious, dazzling vision, to the occupants of the boat floating serenely along a few yards above.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE YOUNG HUNTERS CONCLUDE TO MOVE.

"SEE?" said Ranty, in exasperation. "Of course I saw! Wasn't he a-looking over a big stone, and didn't his whole top-knot show as plain as day, to say nothing of his face clear down to his neck—"

"His shoulders, you mean," corrected Will.

"Will you keep still, say? Now you have made me lose where I was."

"But you know his face does go to his shoulders," insinuated Will, meekly.

Ranty gave him a withering look, and went on.

"And there he was gazing like Jeptha in the enchanted castle, all eyes and ears to see where I would go. But he dodged back before you could say 'Jack Robinson,' as soon as I looked that way. The old sinner! If he had waited two seconds, I'd have fixed him!"

And Ranty sat down, looking about as wrathful as a "well-governed youth would be expected to look; a kind of 'eat 'em up' expression," as Will remarked afterward, and stared at his three companions as if for a wager.

They had been in their cave a little over a week; had hunted, fished, trapped; had had two or three slight brushes with the Indians, out of which they had come "whole-skinned," and altogether had had quite as lively a time as any four young and inexperienced hunters would have expected to have, "under the circumstances," Ranty said. But to-day that last-mentioned individual had been out to attend to some traps he had set on the river, and returning just before night, with several pelts and the saddle of a deer, had imagined that he had been discovered by some prowling savages, and was being followed. He had heard, two or three times, sounds that he was sure were not made by the wind, and just as he was about to enter the cave from the hill, he caught a glimpse of a dusky face peering at him from over a neighboring rock. Ranty had instantly covered him with his rifle, and when he dodged behind the

stone, had started down the hill at a breakneck pace, regardless of consequences. When the savage saw that he would have to take to his heels, or fight, he chose the former way from the difficulty, and leaping from behind the stone, discharged his rifle at Ranty, and then before the latter could "pull up," as he expressed it, and draw bead upon him, he vanished from sight.

"But you can just depend that he knows we are here," declared Ranty, after they had discussed the matter pro and con. "And before we know it, there'll be all the Indians in the Red river valley stewing about this hill. And they'll make it a warm place for us, too."

"I don't see but what we shall have to change our quarters," put in Albert. "It is too bad, too, for we were getting along finely here. I think it a mere chance if we find another place as well calculated for a 'house' as this."

"If we had only thought and brought along a few cans of nitro-glycerine," Fred suggested. "With them we could no doubt have remained in undisturbed possession of our domicile as long as we wanted to. We would have let them attack us, and then we would have rolled a can down among them. They would have dispersed."

"Well, what will we do? Wait till they move us, or move ourselves, in anticipation of such an event? It will come, now they have found out where we are, and perhaps sooner than we want it," and Fred looked as if he rather favored the idea of vacating at once.

"I won't go for all the Indians in North America," protested Ranty stoutly. "Here just as we have got nicely settled, and are living like kings. If the Indians want to come rampaging around, let them rampage; I reckon we can do a little in that line ourselves."

"Oh, yes," suggested Will, "you'd eat up three or four tribes, let them come one at a time; any of us could. But what if they should find both entrances, and a lot of 'em lay around each one, to pop over the first fellow that came out. Then where'd you be?"

"In the cave, of course," returned Ranty composedly.

"Yes; and there'd be a famine the second day! No-sir-ee! I vote we pick up traps and march. I don't fancy being roasted or starved out, myself."

"All right," returned Ranty. "I want to go, too, but I thought I'd wait and see if any of you fellows had spunk enough to stay. But I see you haven't. Oh for the spirit of '76," and Ranty heaved a lugubrious sigh.

"You do need some of it sadly," returned Will. "But this isn't business. When had we better start?"

"If we really conclude to go, I think the sooner the better," answered Albert. "And I really think we had. Laying aside the fact of to-night's discovery, it would be an advisable plan, in my opinion. The Indians are thick as bees, and we are not safe outside the cave. No doubt that savage could have killed Ranty to-night, had he not wished to follow him to the hiding-place of his companions. And that being settled the next thing is, where will we go?"

It took some time to decide this. Finally they all settled on some point further down the river.

"It is lucky we built that canoe," said Albert. "It is exactly what we want now. I think I had better go and see if it is safe while the rest of you attend to packing up."

Ranty volunteered to accompany him, as it would take but a short time to gather up the things, and the two other boys would have ample time.

The darkness had fairly settled down as they passed out the back entrance of the cave. But they picked their way carefully along, keeping eyes and ears on the alert for any enemy that might be lurking about.

Their canoe was a huge, birch-bark structure,

made after one they had found floating down the river, only much larger. It was of sufficient size to hold the four and their accouterments. They kept it in a little sheltered cove on the river, where it was securely hidden until within a few feet of it. They were gratified to find it reposing snugly where they had left it.

"That difficulty is over with then," remarked Fred, as Ranty and Albert entered the cave, and reported everything right. "Will and I have been thinking," he continued, as they gathered around for supper, "that we had better leave a lot of our stuff here; I don't see how we can take it all with us."

"Nor I either," concluded Ranty, making a fresh attack on a venison rib. "We have got so many hides and pelts, to say nothing of the dried meat."

"We can't take all of those, that is a sure thing," decided Albert.

"Well, here is the plan Will and I have," continued Fred. "You know that little square cave that opens off the 'stairway'? The entrance to it isn't more than a foot and a half square, and we have found a stone that is a perfect fit. We crowded it in till it was just even with the wall, and I'll wager you might look at it fifty times and never mistrust it wasn't a part and parcel of the solid wall. That cave we can leave our extra things in, and if we don't come back in a year, they will be there safe."

They at once commenced moving the extra things into it. Then the remainder was made up in compact bundles, and everything put in trim for departure.

They concluded, however, to remain at the cave till toward morning, giving themselves just time to get nicely away from the neighborhood before the dawn. Accordingly, they took turns in sleeping and watching, one remaining on guard all the time at the back entrance of the cave. It chanced to be Ranty's watch last, and at a quarter-past two he roused his companions.

"What's up?" asked Will, as he felt Ranty's energetic pokes.

"Murder, fire, thieves, and Old Nick let loose generally," answered Ranty. "Come, turn out! Morning has spread her gauzy mantle over hill and dale, and by the time we get breakfast, it will be ten o'clock."

"Looks like it," returned Will, poking about after a missing moccasin. "Darker than the under side of a coal-mine shaft. Darn the thig, anyhow! Where's it gone?"

"Softly, my lad! Disturb not the peaceful silence by the melodious cooing of your voice," drawled Ranty, as he brightened up the light. "There you are! When I get some breakfast, I shall feel better!"

"Thought you had the stomach-ache," averred Will. "Seen any Indians?"

"Not an Indian. Everything quiet as a lamb. Hark!"

The tone in which he uttered the last word enjoined the strictest of silence upon his companions. All four listened for fully a minute.

"I heard something," Ranty whispered. "You stay here; I'll be back directly."

While their things were all in the cavern that opened from the ledge, they had come to-night, to sleep in the one nearest the entrance from the hill. Ranty glided silently along to the narrow passage that opened into the air, at the place mentioned before, as resembling a disused cellar, and peered cautiously out. The darkness was not so intense, but what objects were distinguishable some feet away, and for a moment his heart beat rapidly, as he gazed upon the scene before him.

But dauntless Ranty, with a courage and assurance equal to half a dozen ordinary boys, was undecided but for an instant—the next he was creeping to a spot, where, raising himself up a little, he could obtain an unobstructed view.

Within a dozen feet of him, in the hollow before alluded to, a number of shadowy forms were congregated, while more were climbing silently over the rocks!

CHAPTER XIV.

A FIGHT UNDER GROUND.

"Now there's the tallest kind of a fuss brewing," muttered Ranty, with more force than elegance. "And the size of it will greatly depend on Randolph Hazelton, Esq., who is a most remarkable and extraordinary youth, but who isn't given to boasting, when there is any one around to hear," he added, with a *sing-froic* that was refreshing. "But the best thing you can do now is to get back and let the balance of the company know what's up."

Moving as light as a cat, Ranty reached the cavern. The "balance of the company" were standing where he had left them, every faculty on the alert.

"There's murder in the camp and Old Nick to pay generally!" declared Ranty, in a shrill whisper. "The cellar is half-full of Indians, and more coming in all the time! What will we do?"

"Block up the entrance!" exclaimed Albert. "Here is a rock that will go far toward it, if we can only get it in position. Move careful—that's it! Now we'll throw some of these torches over in the passage, and two of us will take our position behind the stone, while the other two get more rocks to furnish the barricade!"

His orders were carried out in a twinkling. The blazing torches lighted up the passage beyond, and while Fred and Will took up their position behind the rock they had rolled to the mouth of the entrance, Ranty and Albert commenced carrying rocks to finish the obstruction. But, before they had hardly made a beginning, a babel of shouts and yells arose, and echoed through the cavern. The savages had discovered the light, and saw that the surprise was not such a one as they had planned!

There was an instant's silence; then with the most diabolical screeches they were capable of uttering, they rushed pell-mell along the narrow passage!

But a terrific reception awaited them. The blazing bark lighted up their brawny forms to the best advantage. Over the rock behind which the two brave boys were crouched, the frowning muzzles of two double guns appeared; a cloud of smoke for an instant concealed them, then came a report that seemed to shake the whole cavern, so deafening and terrific was it!

The loud yelling of the savages was drowned in the prolonged roaring that filled the place; then came another flash, and a report seemingly more terrific than the first!

"Come right along, don't stop to knock!" rung out Ranty's clear, metallic voice, as he leveled his revolver up in the struggling mass in the passageway. Albert stood beside him, his eyes blazing; his manly young form drawn to its full height, his own revolver on a level with his companion's. They had sprung to the rock on the first alarm.

Blinded by the smoke that filled the passageway, confused and panic-stricken by the terrible reception, and by the sight of their dead and wounded companions, the Indians rushed in a body back along the rocky way, pulling each other down in their mad retreat, and yelling and screaming till the very walls trembled with the terrible uproar!

"Hurrah!" shouted Ranty, waving his smoking revolver around his head; and "hurrah!" and "hurrah!" echoed around the cavern till it seemed as if a dozen voices had taken up and repeated the sound.

And then almost a silence reigned. Not an Indian was to be seen save those dead and dying in the passage. The boys examined themselves critically, but not one had received a scratch.

"That is what I call being fortunate!" exclaimed Albert. "But we mustn't stand idle. They may make another rush soon."

Every one sprung to the task of barricading the entrance. In ten minutes it was done, and in so effectual a manner that twice that time would be necessary to undo the work. Occasionally a faint chorus of shouts would reach them from the outside, but no other sign that the savages were near.

A consultation was immediately held. It was thought best to leave at once by the other entrance.

"Two of you can carry the things out and lower them, while I stay and watch and the other gets breakfast," suggested Ranty. "We've got to eat, you know. What do you say?"

"I think the plan admirable," answered Albert.

They at once proceeded to put it in execution. Twenty minutes passed, but the Indians made no attack. Then the party partook of the breakfast Will had prepared.

"Now then, everything is ready for a move," said Albert. "The things are all in a safe place below the ledge. Hark, what's that?"

"They are coming again, as sure as you're born!" exclaimed Ranty. "The old sinners! Look out!"

It was spoken just in time. A volley came from the passageway, some of the balls finding entrance to the cavern between the interstices in the barricade.

The boys returned the salute, with better effect, and again the Indians beat a retreat, the counterpart of the first.

"I think it will be some time before they make another attempt," said Albert. "And the best thing we can do is to improve the opportunity to get a start."

They threaded the passages till they reached the outer cavern, and from the ledge descended, by way of the friendly tree, to the ground. It took them some time, having to move with the utmost caution after leaving the cave.

"All safe?" asked Albert, as he glanced keenly around in the darkness.

"All safe, and ready for mischief," answered Ranty.

"Very well; follow me, then, and step as light as possible."

So saying, Arlington moved away in the darkness, followed closely by his three companions. Being impeded by the heavy load each carried, it was some time before they reached the spot where the canoe was kept concealed, and all felt considerably wearied, and were glad that it was no further.

"All whole, so far," said Albert, with satisfaction. "And now—"

He broke off abruptly. Stooping down, he had reached forth his hand, expecting to lay it upon the prow of the canoe, but it grappled empty space. He stooped still lower, and glanced under the overhanging bushes. The rest were also looking; but the little glimmering spot of water bore nothing upon its surface—what they looked for was not visible within range of their vision.

"By all the kinks of ill-luck, boys!" exclaimed Albert, in a shrill whisper. "The boat is gone!"

CHAPTER XV.

A NARROW ESCAPE.

A light then would have shone upon four of the blankest faces that could be imagined. Each looked at the other in the darkness, the same thought in the minds of all.

"Well, if here ain't a go!" exclaimed Ranty, at last, drawing a long breath. "Now, what in the name of old Mythology, and the Greek deities, in general, are we to do?"

"The first thing is, has some one taken it, or has it got loose, and floated away?" said Albert.

"The very question I was about to propound," added Will.

"Let's scatter out, and examine the bank," suggested Fred. "I don't believe it could have gotten out of the cove, without help, an' in case it has broken its fastenings, we'll find it somewhere."

"An idea worth enlarging, practically," returned

Ranty. And dividing, two went each way around the lagoon.

"Not on our side, at any rate," remarked Albert, as they reached the spot where the water joined the river. "Perhaps Ranty and Will have had better success, but I hardly dare hope for it."

They retraced their steps, and had followed to the river on the other side before they met their companions. Their hearts had "descended to their boot-heels," Fred said, when, to their surprise and satisfaction, they suddenly perceived the shadowy outlines of the canoe close to the bank of the river, and saw Ranty and Will seated therein, pushing it silently up-stream.

"Of all the good luck in the world, boys!" exclaimed Ranty, as the prow grated on the sand at the water's edge. "We found it eight or ten rods down, lodged on a tree that had fallen into the river and sunk, with one long limb sticking up, that caught it near the stern! If it wasn't lucky, then I don't know what could be!"

With light hearts, the young hunters towed it into the cove, loaded in their accouterments, and prepared to start. Albert being older and more experienced, took his place in the stern, to guide the craft, while the three boys ranged themselves along in good positions to use their paddles. And they pushed off, and commenced floating down the swift current of the river.

They kept near the center of the stream, and the boat, impelled by the skillful paddlers and the current, fairly seemed to fly.

"Boys," said Ranty, when they had been afloat twenty minutes or half an hour, "it's coming daylight. See there!" and he pointed his dripping paddle to where a faint streak of light was visible in the eastern horizon.

"That comes from having to fuss around so long," responded Will, giving his paddle an energetic flop into the water. "We ought to have been ten miles away now."

The light streak widened rapidly; and soon the gray dawn spread over river and forest, and the morning was fairly begun.

"They are using some forcible language back at the cave about now," said Albert, looking up the river. "I presume to say they are as mad a lot of savages, as could readily be gotten together on so short a notice."

"I hope they won't burst a blood-vessel in their wrath," added Will. "The loss to society couldn't be estimated. What if there should be fifteen or twenty of the imps along the river-bank somewhere, and should pepper away at us as we are going down. I reckon there would be some lively times."

The party scanned the banks closely. They were very high on one side, sloping from the water's edge and covered with cedar, hemlock and pine, to their very summit, nearly a hundred feet above. On the other side, for one or two hundred yards back, was a low flat, covered with a dense growth of butternut, hickory, and the like, then the bank arose similar to the other side. These banks and flats alternated every half-mile, or less, and with such regularity as to keep a bank and flat opposite each other on their respective sides.

From the high bank an enemy could have found perfect concealment, and been in command of the river. The boys knew this, and held themselves ready to act on the instant should it be necessary.

"I've twisted my neck to watch, till it's crooked worse than any crane's ever was," declared Will, resting his paddle on the edge of the boat. "Indians or no Indians, I vote we stop and rest, and get something to eat. It's ten o'clock."

"I second the motion," responded Ranty, promptly, holding up his oar.

All felt the need of food and rest, as they had been paddling steadily for several hours, and so, at a suitable point, the canoe was turned shoreward.

It was a beautiful spot where they landed. While the others prepared something to refresh the "inner

boy," Albert decided to climb the bank, and take a look at the country.

He took what is termed in hunter parlance a "hog's-back," a long ridge that sloped from the very water's edge, and was not as steep as the bank on either side of it. Reaching the top of this, he halted to take breath, and look about him.

A splendid country spread out before him. A plain came to within a few yards of the timber-lined bank, covered with rich grass and occasional patches of trees, while away beyond arose a chain of mountains, their tops looking hazy and blue in the distance.

Not a living thing was in sight; all was peaceful and quiet, and the feeling, which the entire absence of any signs of Indians, since starting, had formed, this quiet scene seemed to increase.

"I don't believe there is an enemy within a dozen miles of here. I feel as though there wasn't, at least."

At that instant a slight crackling in the undergrowth startled him. He glanced quickly that way. The noise continued, and while he was wondering what it could be a huge bear came lumbering out, and started along as if to descend the bank.

His first thought was to let the animal go, as the report of his gun might attract any savages who were in the neighborhood. But so sure was he that there were none near that he at last decided to run the risk, and shoot the bear.

By this time the animal had gotten nearly past him, and had halted an instant at the brow of the bank. Evidently he scented danger, for he was looking directly at our hero, and the first motion the latter made toward raising his gun to his face the bear saw, and with a snort started swiftly along.

Albert fired at him on the jump. The huge animal let out a loud snarl, and giving a tremendous leap disappeared over the bank. The instant he fired Albert started toward him. He heard the crushing of the brush in his downward course, and reaching the spot where he had stood peered eagerly over.

The bank was very steep. Albert could not see the bear, but the waving of the tops of the undergrowth showed him his course. He was half-way to the water's edge.

"I am afraid I made a poor shot that time," he soliloquized. "If he would only run over the boys they would make a finish of him, but he is going too far to the left to strike them. I believe he intends crossing the river. If he does there will be a chance to get him yet."

Struck with this last thought Albert started up. At the same instant the heavy crack of a musket broke the silence, and with a groan he fell forward, and the next moment he was crashing through the brush that lined that steep, precipitous bank!

"Hark!" exclaimed Ranty, stopping the wiper half-way up in the rifle and resting his hand on the cap; "wasn't that Albert's gun?"

"Nothing shorter, as sure as you're born!" cried Will. "What can he be shooting at? He said he thought it best not to use firearms unless absolutely necessary. And here he is setting the example himself."

"Perhaps it was necessary," suggested Fred. "But it can't be that he has run afoul of reds, or we should hear more."

But while they were talking a second report came, but not such a one as the first. While that was the whip-like crack that denoted the rifle, this was a broad, heavy report, unmistakably that of a smooth-bored musket.

"Something up, boys!" cried Ranty, jerking out the wiper and hastily inserting a couple of cartridges in the empty barrels. "Never mind the cookery! Grab your revolvers, and come on!"

A wild yell of triumph, a yell that could come from none but an Indian's throat echoed from above.

"Indians!" cried Fred.

"Tumble up!" roared Ranty.

The advice was superfluous. Both Fred and Will were rushing up the steep bank like a tornado.

The shouts from above continued, and seemed to come nearer. Suddenly Ranty stumbled over something, and the next instant a strange cry broke from his lips.

"It's Albert, and he's killed!"

It was Albert sure enough. He lay upon his back on the grassy bank, bare-headed, his face covered with blood and dirt.

The boys stood an instant as if struck suddenly dumb. A crackling of the undergrowth, and a wild yell aroused them, and broke the spell. Two savages descending the bank, had discovered them.

"You smutty villains!" yelled Ranty in a rage. "We'll fix you!"

Their rifles leaped to the shoulders of the three boy hunters with one accord, and three pair of grief-stricken, revengeful eyes glanced along the shining barrels. The savages saw the motion, and with a loud shout, one of them leaped behind a range of trees, that completely concealed him from view. The other endeavored to follow his example but it was too late! Three heavy reports suddenly broke on the air, so close together that they blended into one, and with a spasmodic clutch at his naked breast, the savage reeled backward, and was dead before he fell.

With another howl, this time of defiance, Ranty sprung up the bank. But the other Indian had made good his escape.

The three gathered around their prostrate companion, and silently and tenderly, Fred lifted his head.

"The motion brought a groan from the insensible form.

"He ain't dead!" cried Ranty, in a transport. "Oh hallelujah!" and a moment after he was tearing like a lunatic down the bank to a little stream, where he hastily filled his cap with water. When he returned two minutes later, Albert was sitting up, wiping the blood from his face.

"All right, Ranty," he said with a little laugh as he noticed his white, scared face. "I'm not hurt any to speak of, and no bones broken. But I'll take the water to help me get off this blood and dirt. That's it. You look like a ghost."

"Well, I guess you would," said Ranty. "My heart goes hip-i-ta-hop yet. I thought you was dead, and pretty near buried. I won't be in such a hurry next time." And Ranty sat down on a root to recover breath.

"Don't, and I can assure you I am as good as half a dozen dead men yet," replied Albert, as he arose to his feet and examined his bruises more carefully.

But not a wound was on his person save a gash over his left temple in the edge of the hair. An examination of this showed it had been done by a very small bullet.

"A buck-shot more like," corrected Will, looking at it closely. "You can see it is cut smooth. If it had been a bullet from a grooved rifle, it would have torn, because it would have gone whirling. And it wasn't a rifle that we heard either."

This proved correct, for on the body of the dead Indian was a pouch of buck-shot and some birch bark stripped very fine for wadding, while beside him lay an empty musket.

"He has gone to his last account," said Ranty, as they examined him. "It is no more than right. He intended to kill Albert, and would us, if he could."

It was almost a miracle that the fall had not killed Arlington. He had slid and rolled several yards down the steep bank, stopping at last on the little level spot where his companions had found him. "I remember nothing after thinking I would start down the bank after the bear, except a sudden blindness and a terrific shock. The next I recollect

was when you picked me up," he said, in answer to their inquiries.

They scooped a shallow grave in the soft bank and buried the dead savage. Three ghastly holes in his breast showed that every bullet fired had taken effect. Though an enemy, the three boys straightened his limbs and laid him reverently in his last resting-place. They were not enough accustomed to death to look upon it without awe, and hardly a word was spoken till the grave was filled. Then they returned to their camping-spot.

Albert's wound was nothing serious. Ranty rummaged diligently among a lot of "extraneous matter" in his knapsack, consisting of scraps of buck-skin, strings, tangled fish-lines, and a half-a-dozen loose cartridges that had spilled from a bursted case and fished out therefrom a roll of salve. Meanwhile Will had prepared some bandages with which they were supplied, and when the wound was nicely dressed Albert declared he felt as "good as new."

After they had finished dinner, Ranty avowed his intention of following along the river a few rods, to see if he could find any signs of the bear Albert had shot; while the rest put their camp equipments in the boat. He had been gone but a few minutes when they heard him shout, and going up found him beside the dead bear.

"You see he couldn't get any further," said Ranty, pulling away at one of the monstrous hind legs in a vain endeavor to roll the animal upon his back. "See where the bullet went in? Right there in the side of his neck. Wasn't so bad a shot after all."

Fred and Will assisted him, and together they turned the bear on his back. And while Albert sat on a moss-covered log, the young hunters stripped the hide from the carcass.

"Won't that make a gorgeous robe?" exclaimed Will, holding it up with Ranty's help. "The future Mrs. Arlington will have the pleasure of taking a ride, snugly ensconced under it, no doubt. Happy will be the day!"

"Amen!" laughed Albert, as he rose from the log. "I believe I feel rather sore and stiff. But I think the sooner we get under way, the better."

And fifteen minutes after, they had left their temporary camping-spot some distance behind. Hour after hour they floated down, but saw no further sign of any savages.

Suddenly, Ranty, who was nearest the prow, ceased paddling, and looked intently at a certain spot on the bank.

"If I didn't see that bush yonder, move, then my eyes are not mates. But, shades of Caesar's specter! Look there!"

The boys looked. Ranty, with his paddle elevated, his eyes the size of dinner-plates—or less—and an expression of sublime amazement on his face, sat rooted to the spot.

And no wonder. The vision before them, seen in such a place, where miles and miles of deepest wilderness lay between them and civilization, was calculated to inspire astonishment in any one not entirely devoid of the emotion. For there, standing on a rock, her form clearly defined against the background of green, was a dazzling figure—little Flo—her face all aglow, and her curls dancing in the breeze.

Hardly the space of one instant she stood there; then a clear voice, full of warning, reached the boys' ears. The little figure gave a quick glance behind, and before the young hunters could take a second look, she had sprung ashore and disappeared!

And simultaneously the sharp crack of a rifle sounded, and a bullet whizzed past them, striking the water a little beyond!

CHAPTER XVI.

A RACE, AND CHANGE OF PROGRAMME.

"PULL for the shore, boys!" cried Albert, "We have no chance here!"

The canoe was whirled with the rapidity of light, and headed for the shore. But, before they had gone a dozen lengths, the crack of revolvers and the shrill war-cry of the savages came from the bank, showing that some kind of an engagement was taking place.

"Run the boat right up in this hole; it's a capital place!" cried Ranty, who was in the prow. "That's it! Now pull down the bows a little, so, and it won't be noticed."

With one accord the boys sprung out, and rushed in the direction of the *meille*. But the firing had ceased, and the yells were receding.

"They're running off!" exclaimed Will. "Hurry up and we'll see them when we raise the bank!"

"That's good advice, when you're two or three rods ahead," returned Ranty, who was puffing along like a miniature engine a little behind.

"A few more such runs as this would make a new man of me, I guess," said Albert, who was running beside Ranty. "I couldn't hardly move when I started."

"Desolation and ruination!" yelled Will, scrambling to his feet from a "scooped out" place in the bank. "Running into another such a hole as that will be my complete demoralization. Oh, Jupiter!"

"Hurry up!" roared Ranty, now a dozen yards ahead.

They reached the top of the bank out of breath. Far away below, on a little open plain, rode two figures at full speed. A single glance showed them to be women. And in hot pursuit was a considerable party of Indians, mounted on fleet mustangs, who were yelling and brandishing their weapons to incite their ponies to greater speed.

The four stood and watched the scene with interest. The two pursued were evidently well mounted and had considerable the start. But what puzzled the young hunters the most, was the fact that the pursuing savages were going in a direction which showed that they had started from a point some distance below and not from where they were standing and where the skirmish had taken place.

But while they were looking out upon the edge of the plain, some distance in the rear of the pursuers appeared a single savage on foot, who followed on a steady run.

"I think I have the true solution of the case," said Albert, suddenly. "That Indian is the one who was with that one we killed this forenoon. He has followed down to here, and was lying in ambush for us."

"Then the two fugitives yonder ran across him here; the skirmish told the other savages further down the river a fight was going on, and they, starting up, saw them, and set out in pursuit."

This was the true solution of the affair, and so the boys thought on hearing it. But while they stood watching, both pursuers and pursued vanished from sight.

It will be remembered that our party had not decided on their stopping-place when they left the cave and commenced their river journey. A consultation held now on the brow of the bank ended in their determination to stop at this point.

Albert was the one who proposed this. The Indian who had been lying in wait for them, would inform the others of the party descending the river, and the result would be an ambush at some point below.

But this was not all. The beautiful vision of which they had caught so brief a glimpse on the river bank and again up here had imbued the young hunters with a strong desire to know more of both, and how they came to be here in this vast, unbroken wilderness. Were they alone? And were they about to appeal to them for help? What else could their object have been in signaling to them?

"I can just tell you what," expostulated Ranty, energetically, "if we don't stay here and try to hunt them up, I shall have a mean opinion of four Michigan boys, now I can tell you! Jupiter!"

continued Ranty in the exigency of the case, "how do we know but what both of them will be taken by the savages and be burnt up, or something else? I feel as if I could eat every Indian in the Red River country right up!" and Ranty looked as though he was ready to commence his masticating operations at once.

Accordingly equipments and camp utensils were made into shape to carry; the boat hidden in a spot where it would require keen eyes to detect it, and then the party climbed the bank and struck straight off from the river toward the distant mountains.

They crossed a small stream that bordered a sort of plain, just at sundown, and deciding that it was as good a spot as they would probably find, pitched their camp on its low, timbered banks.

They had not fully determined on their final stopping-place. Some situation adapted for defense, and one where the savages would not be apt to discover them; and from which they could make hunting excursions in different directions.

As soon as it was fairly dark a fire was kindled, but in such a spot that it could not be seen till directly upon it.

"I've been thinking," remarked Albert in a sort of musing tone.

"An unusual occupation for you to indulge in," interrupted Will, gravely, as he polished a roasted rib. "Try it light at first."

"Children shouldn't talk when grown people are conversing," put in Ranty, reprovingly.

"Oh, go ahead, Albert, and never mind the pap-pooses," advised Fred, covertly stealing a little coffee from Ranty's cup to replenish his own. "Tell us what you think, and we'll sip our beverage meanwhile."

"You'll sip something else, most irreverent youth, if you don't look out," admonished Ranty, with a suspicious glance at his cup of diminished coffee and Will's full one. "I've borne and borne with resignation and patience, till a lack of coffee has ceased to be a virtue—so look out."

"Business before pleasure, gentlemen," suggested Albert, helping himself to another rib. "I was about to say that I think we didn't reflect any great credit upon ourselves by leaving the river when we did. I am afraid mischief will grow out of it."

"Why so?" was the query from all.

"Well, you see, in the first place that Indian will carry news to the rest, that we were there, and then I think when they give up the chase of the two girls—for it is my opinion it will result in nothing, as they were the best mounted—they will come back there, and take our trail. If we had kept down the river a short distance further, before leaving, it would have rendered our trail much harder to find. As it is, nothing stands in the way of their following us immediately!"

This was a view of the case they had not taken before. But it looked very probable now. However, the savages would have to relinquish the trail, now that darkness had come.

"And if they want to come in the morning, let 'em," said Will, with a fierce look, as he chawed away on a steak.

It was thought unnecessary to station a guard; and so the fire was put out, and the party wrapped themselves in their blankets, and were soon asleep.

The first bars of the morning sun were slanting through the treetops when Albert awoke. He hastily aroused his companions, and then, taking his rifle, went out to the edge of the plain to see if there was any sign of savages visible on their trail.

Their course, before reaching their present camping-spot, was traceable, at intervals, for nearly two miles from his standing-point, but though he scanned it long and critically, nothing suspicious met his eye.

He returned and reported to his companions. Ranty was just about to start down-stream to look about a little, while Will and Fred "kept camp,"

"I won't be gone over fifteen minutes," were his parting words; and taking his rifle, he sauntered away, little dreaming what "game" he was destined to find.

CHAPTER XVII.

A SURPRISE AND A BATTLE.

RANTY kept a sharp look-out in every direction, as he passed along. He kept within sight of the stream, and had gone perhaps a quarter of a mile, when, stopping to peer through the foliage at the water to see if any ducks were in view, he was startled by hearing a girlish voice, clear and sweet, and but a short distance away.

"Oh, Madge, isn't it a perfectly splendid morning! See how the sunshine glints through the trees and the sky is 'darkly, deeply' blue, and every bird is trying to sing the loudest! Let's build a cabin, dress *ala* wild maidens, and spend the remainder of our days in peace, comfort, and a shanty. What do you say?"

"All very nice, Flo," replied a silvery voice, and Ranty heard the musical laugh that accompanied it. "But what about the wolves, and Indians, and the other inhabitants? Would they be sociable, pleasant neighbors, think?"

"I'm afraid they would be sociable but not very pleasant. But, that is always the way! I can see we shall have to give it up! If one finds a paradise, there's always a skeleton in it somewhere. Oh, dear! What a world of tribulation and other things this is! Do you suppose Uncle Abe will find them?"

"What, the tribulation, and other things?" Ranty heard her companion ask.

"You know what I meant, Madge Lennox! Those four dashing hunters that were in the boat."

"How do you know they *were* dashing?" asked Madge, while Ranty so far forgot himself as to give an audible whistle.

Perhaps the sight before him had something to do with it. For he had crept along in the direction of the voices till he could command a view of the speakers. It is unnecessary to say that they were none other than Florrie Stanley and Madge Lennox.

They were standing in a beautiful little open spot in the woods. Madge's hand rested on the neck of her steed, while Flo held a handful of grass tantalizingly near Bessie's nose. Ranty gazed in stupid amazement at the sight. The two girls, with their glowing cheeks, the breeze toying with their sunny hair, and their bright, airy dresses looking so neat and graceful, might have dazzled older boys than Ranty.

He was still standing there, thinking what was best to be done, when the report of a rifle broke on the still morning air. It sounded about half a mile away, and seemed to come from the vicinity of a tall, conical rock which the boys had passed the day previous, a short time before encamping.

"What's in the wind *now*, I'd like to know?" muttered Ranty, *sotto voce*, looking hurriedly around. "Hello! they've heard it, too!" he continued, as he saw Madge and Flo preparing to mount. "Guess I won't make myself known just at present, but saunter back and investigate."

If the gait Ranty took, when a safe distance from the girls, was a "saunter," it would require a lively imagination to decide what would constitute a run. Over logs that lay close to the ground; under those that lay up; ducking under dense-topped undergrowth, and clearing piles of *debris*, Ranty pranced along, presenting an appearance more in accordance with an escaped lunatic, fleeing from a thousand imaginative terrors, than a "respectable well-governed youth," as Will informed his companions afterward, for that individual, coming at a similar gait from the camp, slacked up just in time to avoid a collision.

"What's afoot?" gasped Ranty, puffing like a miniature steam-engine.

"Indians!" yelled Will, whirling around and stum-

bling over a decayed log. "Only part of 'em's mounted! Jupiter Pluvius! Come on!"

The two dashed forward, and in a moment came upon Albert and Fred at the edge of the plain. And there, less than a quarter of a mile away, were a score or more of mounted Indians, with nearly half as many on foot, yelling, brandishing their weapons, and urging their mustangs toward a single white horseman a good rifle-shot away. And then like a cloud, started up a second party of Indians in front of him, and spreading out, both parties commenced hemming him in!

"Follow me, boys," cried Albert, in a clear, ringing voice, forgetting everything in the excitement of the moment. And with one accord the four started on a run for the scene of action.

The fugitive saw them, and like a clarion note rung out his shout of defiance, as he urged his steed toward the enemy. And simultaneously a puff of smoke curled from his rifle, and a brawny brave tumbled from his horse.

A score of the savages started, with wild yells toward our party, on perceiving them. With one accord the boys halted and prepared for action.

"Wait till they are within a hundred yards," came Albert's clear, even tones, "and then take good aim, and don't waste a shot. *Good fighting is all that can save us now!*"

Not a nerve trembled at thought of the peril before them. Like statues they stood, waiting for the proper moment to arrive.

"Now!"

At the low-spoken word, their rifles leaped to their shoulders. Four curling puffs of smoke; four heavy reports, that blended almost to one, and four of the oncoming savages reeled and fell.

The line half-halted, wavered, then closed up. But their indecision was fatal. Again came a volley from the young hunters, plowing through their ranks with terrible effect!

"Come on, ye sut-begrimed, buckskin-colored, lizard-eating hybrids! Screw up yer courage to the sticking p'int, yell yer best yell, an' precipitate yer selves forrad outer the roarin', clawin', funeral-making terrors o' the Northwest, the rampageous rampagers of the Red River!" yelled a defiant voice.

The young hunters looked up. There, riding as though pursued by the Arch Fiend himself, was old Abe Anderson, his empty rifle fast to his back, a revolver in his right hand and a knife in the other, his long grizzled hair sailing out on the impromptu breeze. He had broken through the party of savages behind, and taking advantage of the hesitation and wavering of the charging band, had passed them like an arrow.

But by the time he had joined our party, the Indians had recovered and were coming forward, giving vent to yells of exasperation.

Then the sharp crack of revolvers followed each other in quick succession, and a perfect din reigned. Suddenly old Abe uttered a cry of alarm. Following the direction of his gaze, Albert echoed the cry. There, scarce a hundred yards away, were Flo and Madge, urging their horses toward them at their best speed, their long drapery flowing behind them on the breeze they engendered. Albert at once recognized them as the two they had seen the day before.

"Go back!" yelled old Abe, forgetting for a moment the conflict raging about him. "Tearin' Jerusalem! Go BACK!"

He threw up his arms; he waved his cap, he yelled himself hoarse. But still they came on. Albert saw in the hand of each a tiny revolver, in their faces the determination to take part in the affray.

"Oh, climbin' caterpillars! They'll be killed, sure!" yelled old Abe, half distracted. "Great Gehosophat!"

A new party of Indians suddenly appeared, sweeping like a tornado down upon them, and in such a direction as to cut the two girls off. Old Abe struck his horse a sharp blow, and shouted to the boys:

"Mount and run! It's the only way! I'll help the gals!"

"We had better take his advice," shouted Albert. "Secure a mustang, and all keep together if possible!"

A dozen ponies were galloping about hither and thither; ponies belonging to the killed and wounded savages, and that seemed loth to leave the fight, but remained as though some strange fascination held them.

Albert caught one of these as it passed him, and vaulted upon its back. A savage sprung toward him with swinging tomahawk, but went down before his revolver. And in one minute all were mounted, and breaking through the lines, lashed their steeds into a dead run.

"Look, yonder goes Abe and the two girls!" cried Ranty, as he pointed to them, galloping away in a different direction, with old Abe ahead, and a horde of savages in pursuit. "And they're pulling away from the red-skins, too!"

"Yes, but we ain't!" cried Will. "There's forty or fifty after us, and gaining every minute!"

A quick glance behind proved that he spoke the truth, and they lashed their mustangs into the best speed they were capable of making. But, either they did not understand the art of urging them forward, or the pursuing savages were better mounted, for the latter continued to gain slowly, but surely, and now and then a stray bullet flew unpleasantly close.

"Supposing we shoot a little, ourselves?" suggested Will, looking over his shoulder. "They ain't more than forty rods behind, and I had just as soon risk losing a little ammunition as not."

Ranty thought so, too, and they turned in their saddles, and blazed away, aiming at the whole mass. Their bullets evidently flew somewhere near their intended place, for the savages spread out like a flock of pigeons when a hawk dives among them. This was a little triumph, and the two kept blazing away, laughing in spite of their perilous situation, at the frantic dives and dodges of the Indians.

But they found that it resulted in a little good also, for it checked the speed of the Indians, till they, if anything, lost ground. And so our party took turns, and a running fire was kept up for several miles.

They struck the stream at last on which they had encamped the previous night, but many miles below where the race commenced. Here it was quite a stream and had low rocky banks. They turned down it, and were galloping along as fast as their now tired horses would permit, when the Indians, getting a little nearer, opened a fresh fire.

At the first discharge Ranty's horse stumbled, and the boy had only time for a nimble leap when he staggered and fell, shot through the neck.

All three saw the mishap, and pulled up.

"We shall have to make a stand!" cried Albert, springing from his horse, and looking hurriedly around. "But there isn't a tree nor bush to hide behind! Back up here to the brow of the bank, and let them come!"

Will and Fred had sprung from their horses, and then all four started on a run for the bank, but a few yards away. But, suddenly, a hole, a dozen feet across, and half as deep, barred their way. The end next the bank looked like the entrance to a cave.

"It's our best chance!" shouted Albert, and they bounded into it just as a shower of bullets and arrows from the yelling Indians, now not a dozen yards away, hurtled over their heads!

CHAPTER XVIII.

WORKING FOR LIBERTY.

"I RECKON we did that just in time!" cried Ranty, as they ran to the furthest end of the hole. It went back, cave fashion, a dozen feet, or more, and by stooping they could see out the opening, but being dark where they were, the savages could not see them.

A moment more and they had dismounted, and

were gathered about the opening shouting and gesticulating excitedly. Then a lot of stones and bullets struck the ground at the boy's feet, thrown out as a "feeler" by the Indians to determine their position.

"They'll have to aim a little higher with their 'brickbats,' if they expect to damage us," whispered Albert, and a moment after, his rifle cracked, and a savage would have fallen head foremost into the hole, had not his companions caught him and dragged him back.

This incident raised a perfect din, and the jabbering grew more excited than before. But they were careful not to expose themselves as a target again, but kept back out of harm's way.

At last their excitement cooled down a little, and soon almost total silence reigned. This was broken by a voice that evidently was that of a white man; but the speaker kept back from the edge of the opening, so the young hunters could not see him.

"Hello, down there!" it began.

"Well, what of it?" was Ranty's pertinent query, in return.

"Any 'bjections to tellin' who ye are?" continued the voice.

"Not in the least."

Silence a full minute.

"Wal, who the devil be you then?"

"Four Michigan boys," answered Ranty. "Captain, commanding, Albert Arlington, aged twenty-one. Balance of party, Randolph Hazelton, aged fifteen; Fred Carter, aged seventeen, and Will MacDonald, seventeen; all pilgrims. Which means," continued Ranty, by way of explanation, "that we're very grim, and deal in lead pills for the benefit of you and your clique."

A muttered imprecation came from above.

"Don't swear," admonished Ranty. "It's wicked."

"We'll give you something that will be worse than lead pills, you little cuss," shouted the man, savagely.

"Oh, tales untold! You chill our blood with horror!" exclaimed Will, in a tragic tone. "But, why don't you come out and let us see how you look?"

"Say, you think I'm a fool, don't ye?"

"Certainly!" answered Ranty, gravely.

Another muttered imprecation followed, and then a rock, weighing a dozen pounds, came flying through the air, and so well aimed that, had not Ranty sprung hastily aside, it must have struck him. He uttered a deep, hollow groan, as if in agony, and instantly brought his rifle to his face.

The result was as he expected. Hearing the groan the man sprung to the edge of the opening, a large, heavy rock in his hands, thinking to take advantage of their attention to their wounded companion, to hurl it upon them.

He was only in view a brief instant, as he swung it aloft, but it was enough. The loud report of Ranty's piece echoed out, and the bullet struck one of his hands, carrying away a finger completely, and, flattening against the rock he held, spattered into his face, blinding him for an instant. A loud warning-cry was raised, and a dozen dusky arms stretched forth, but all too late, and losing his balance, the man fell head foremost into the opening!

Before he could collect his scattered senses, Albert rushed out, and seizing him by the collar, dragged him into their retreat, while Ranty covered him with his revolver. And there he lay, quaking with fear, no other than the treacherous guide, Warner, who had attempted to betray the two brave girls into the hands of the savages.

"Well, you arn't an over-and-above fair looking specimen even of the kind of bipeds you represent," said Ranty, regarding his painted, blood-stained face, while Will and Fred were binding his hands and feet.

"Now then," demanded Albert, "who are you, and how came you in such bad company?"

"Ye needn't ask me, fer I shan't tell yer nothin'," was the sullen response.

"We could make you, if we chose, but we care nothing about your identity, and had as soon you would keep it to yourself. However, you undoubtedly have influence among the yelling horde above, and we will give you a chance for your life. If you will have them withdraw, and give us a mile the start, we will give you your liberty. Otherwise—" and a significant look finished the sentence.

This was thrown out as a feeler to determine the position held by the prisoner among the Indians. The ruffian's face turned more ghastly than before under the paint and blood. He declared he had no power among the Indians; he reiterated it in a quaking voice, when Ranty pressed the cold muzzle of his revolver against his temple, and told him to "talk straight."

The din above had ceased. The savages were evidently waiting to see what the young hunters would do next.

"You red-skin that can talk," called Albert, after having questioned their prisoners a little, "come out where we can hear you."

"What want?" responded a guttural voice.

"To get out, you old sinner!"

"Keep still, Ranty, and let me do the talking," admonished Albert. "If you will draw off, and let us have a half-hour's start," continued Albert, raising his voice so the Indian could hear, "we will let him go free; otherwise we won't promise you that you will ever see him again."

"He big heap, much fool; don't want to see 'im any more—put in wood an' roast you all togedder," responded the Indian.

"We'll see about that, you smutty imp!" yelled Ranty wrathfully. "I'll bet you'll know it when you get us!"

"Of course he will," said Fred. "And it won't be long either. We can't live in here without food or drink more than three months."

"Who said we could?" responded Ranty, setting his gun against the side of the cave, and commencing to roll up his sleeves.

His companions looked at him in amazement. They saw by the expression of his face that he had thought of some plan of escape. For answer he took Albert by the arm and pulling him to the rear end of the cavern, motioned him to bend down, and listen. Albert did so. A heavy, dull roar came faintly to his ears.

"The river!" he exclaimed, suddenly.

"Exactly," said Ranty. "It ain't more than twenty or thirty feet through to it, and to-night we'll tunnel out!"

Like a flash it entered the mind of each, before Ranty had ceased speaking. They stood looking at each other for a full minute. Here was an easier way out of the difficulty than they had dreamed of!

They commenced the labor at once, while the prisoner lay and watched them, hoping their tunnel would cave in upon them. But, though the ground was not so hard as to render digging extremely laborious, it was still solid enough to preclude all danger of its falling in.

The work progressed rapidly. When dusk came it seemed from the sound of the water, that they must be nearly through, and they concluded to rest awhile. All were hungry and thirsty, but neither food nor water was to be had till they reached the "outer world." Their besiegers had settled down, determined to starve them into submission. They little thought how they were spending their time, and the young hunters had gagged their prisoner to prevent him from calling anything that would give them a clew as to their operations.

After an hour's rest, they again commenced work. They had been digging but a short time, when Albert, who was ahead, suddenly uttered a suppressed exclamation. In thrusting his knife deep into the upper edge of the tunnel to commence pulling down another course of dirt, it went through into empty space; the dirt crumbled in every direc-

tion and fell clattering around them, leaving a hole fully two feet in diameter, through which, but for the darkness, a full view of the river could be obtained.

They held their breath, expecting the Indians had heard the clatter of the falling dirt, but all was still. They enlarged their outlet a little, and found they had aimed exactly right, having struck a narrow flat of sand that stretched along the river about a foot above the water. Peering out, Albert discovered the savages had a small fire, as the light from it was thrown on the river from the bank, lighting up the dark water as it rolled along.

Albert crawled cautiously forth to reconnoiter. In three minutes he returned, and imparted what he had learned to his companions. He had found a good passage along the river's edge where they could retreat with little danger of discovery by the Indians. By peering over the bank, Albert saw a host of the latter squatting about their small fires, smoking and eating.

It was decided to leave their prisoner where he was. The Indians would discover their escape before he would be in any danger of starving.

"And a little wholesome hunger will do you good, you know," said Ranty, fixing the gag more securely in his mouth. "And remember, when you do get free, not to swear. Besides being wicked, it shows bad bringing up. We are sorry to be obliged to leave you gagged, but you know it can't be helped in the present case."

"Fare-ye-well, and if forever," said Will, as they turned to leave, followed by his scowling looks. "If we are never destined to meet again, so mote it be."

They passed along their tunnel, and emerged on the narrow, sandy flat. The soft, yielding soil gave back no answering footfalls, and like dusky shadows they glided along, following down the stream.

The bank was covered with short grass and partly imbedded stones and bowlders; was nearly perpendicular, and from five to ten feet high. At one of the highest points Albert, hearing something, stepped upon a stone that lay on the flat close to this bank, and this raised him, so that by bracing one foot on the perpendicular bank, and hanging to a bush with his hand he was enabled to see over the top.

They were fully two hundred yards below their starting point, but there, within twenty feet, were several savages.

Albert held his breath, and clung to his support. It was a frail one at the best, and began to give under the continued strain brought upon it. But the suspicion of the savages was evidently aroused, for they were looking apparently straight at him, but in the darkness the foliage of the bush concealed the part of his head above the bank.

The bush settled slowly, and each moment Albert felt it weakening. He was afraid to relinquish his hold, for fear the Indians would hear the noise he would necessarily make in descending, or see the sudden straightening of the bush.

But, suspecting something was wrong, Will grasped him from behind and supported his whole weight. Albert relinquished the bush slowly, and the next instant was standing safe on the ground.

But a slight rattling followed, and a small stone came thundering down. With a motion from Albert all four threw themselves flat on the ground, close to the bank.

And none too soon was the precaution taken, for, a moment after a guttural sound came from above, and several dusky faces peered over the bank, clearly outlined against the sky.

But the shadows were deep and dark where the boy-hunters lay, and the eyes of their dusky foes failed to perceive them, and after a somewhat lengthy scrutiny, the faces were withdrawn and the force of Indians moved off, and soon the sound of their footsteps died away.

CHAPTER XIX.

A CAPTURE THAT DIDN'T HOLD.

"TRIPE and b'ar's meat! what ails the hoss? You fidget 'round wuss nor a Blackfoot with the nettle-rash. You've allers been a well-haved hoss, Jimmy, but, by thunder! I b'lieve yer gittin' over it. In-gins? You sniff as though they war some 'round, but hain't I been out two, three times an' seen nary sign? Which on us is mistaken? One or t'other, sur!"

Thus did old Abe Anderson address his horse, as he stood silently by his side peering about him. The first gray light of coming dawn was visible over the tops of the tall pines that lined the mountain side. Twice before had the trapper been called up by the actions of his horse, which bespoke danger at hand, and both times he had made a careful reconnaissance of the place without discovering any signs of an enemy.

"Cur'us," he muttered, glancing sharply about. "Must be he smells *suthin'* or he wouldn't act so. Guess I'll watch a bit, an' see."

He glided along a few steps, and halted in the deep shadow. Grayer and grayer grew the dawn till objects began to be quite distinct to the view.

Old Abe was just about to move from his post, when the rapid tramp of hoofs sounded and a moment after the sharp detonation of a revolver, followed by a quick cry, unmistakably a woman's call for help!

In an instant old Abe was in the saddle and spurring in the direction of the sound. A dozen bounds of his horse, and he was in full view of an exciting scene.

A stalwart savage, mounted on a snorting mustang, was in the act of lifting a woman to the saddle before him. It was Madge Lennox!

Old Abe let out a yell not unlike the roar of an angry grizzly, and raised his rifle. But the action came too late, for, quick as he had been, the savage had been quicker, and his mustang, with a single bound, had carried him beyond the trapper's view.

And simultaneously came a crashing in the undergrowth at the hunter's right, and before he could turn his head, Flo, with her hair loose and falling in a shower behind, and her face pale and terror-stricken, burst into view.

"Oh, Uncle Abe, they have carried her off!" she cried, excitedly. "Go quick! don't mind me. Oh, go, go!"

"Oh, perdition, here!" yelled the trapper, excitedly. "Jump up here with me—no, that's her hoss! That's it! Now come on."

For Madge's horse had suddenly cantered into the open space, and the next instant Flo was on his back, and flying after the trapper like the wind. A dozen bounds and Ned had carried her up even with the latter.

"There they go!" exclaimed the trapper, suddenly; and Flo, looking, saw the savage, still holding Madge, just disappearing around a clump of copsewood a hundred yards ahead.

The next moment they had passed over the spot, and the next drew a quick rein to escape plunging into a small stream that suddenly barred their way.

It had a swift current with a gravelly bed, and five precious minutes passed before Abe Anderson could determine positively which course the savage had taken after entering it.

"He's went up-stream," he announced, springing again to the saddle. And they were galloping along in pursuit as fast as the splashing water would permit.

Meanwhile the boys were putting as much distance as possible between them and the scene of their late adventure.

"Puck found it handier to commence
With a certain share of impudence,"

sung Ranty, in a disconsolate *sotto voce*, "and I com-

menced that way, but it's all as effectually gone as the last meal I eat. Just to reflect that we haven't had a blessed mouthful of anything since six o'clock this morning! It's a darn'd shame, and I'll say it if it don't sound well! The exigency of the case demands it!"

"Hope on, hope ever; bad luck never can last forever. Cheer up, my son Randolph! If that passage isn't exactly like the original, it will do in the present case. Eh?" and Will poked his elbow affectionately into Ranty's ribs.

"You look out!" returned Ranty. "I'll eat you right up presently."

"Boys!" called out Albert, stopping suddenly, "daylight will soon be on hand. It is already growing gray in the east and—"

"My advice would be to stop and cook our breakfast, if we had the wherewith," interrupted Fred. "There will be more danger when the daylight comes, but there's no other way but to wait."

They went on down the stream. Now and then it spread out on some little flat, making a small space of still water, covered with reeds and lilies. As soon as dawn appeared all four commenced scanning these spots in search of ducks. They soon espied a couple which a single shot brought down. These were cooked and made a most welcome breakfast to the four nearly-famished fugitives.

They were now in a well-timbered, somewhat rocky country, and Albert thought it best to leave the stream, which they had been following, and strike directly into it. They would, no doubt, soon find a suitable place, where they could rest and be safe.

The sun was but a short distance above the tree-tops when they halted in a spot well-sheltered, and in which they determined to stay a few hours. Albert volunteered to keep guard, and in five minutes the three tired boy-hunters were fast asleep.

Arlington roamed hither and yon about the place, but everything was quiet, and it seemed as though the deep solitude had never been broken by the voice of man.

But suddenly there were other sounds than those made by the birds. They grew louder and louder, till Arlington plainly distinguished them as made by a horse ridden rapidly through the forest. But, before it could stir, it burst into view.

It was a powerful mustang, and on his back was a painted savage holding Madge Lennox before him in such a manner that her arms were pinioned to her sides. Albert recognized her at once.

The mustang was within a dozen feet of him before its riders saw him. With a tremendous bound, he caught the bridle-rein with his left hand, while his right held a revolver, which covered the breast of the astonished warrior.

With a yell of terror, the savage released his hold on the prisoner, and slid to the ground on the opposite side of his horse, and springing into the woods, disappeared in an instant!

Madge sprung to the ground and held out her hand. Her face was flushed with excitement; her wavy, nut-brown hair was unconfined, and Albert thought he had never seen such a vision of loveliness as greeted him when he raised his eyes to her face.

"I undoubtedly owe my life to you," she said, in her soft, musical voice. "I never can pay the debt, but, believe me, I am *very* grateful!"

"I beg your pardon, but it is I, instead of you, who should be grateful. You saved myself and companions while on the river, and this is only the first installment of the debt. But you have a companion—where is she?"

A smile was dawning on Madge's lips, but it died away, and a look of deep concern spread over her face.

"Safe, I trust—I do not know—but look!"

He looked where she pointed. Some distance away, and far above, their late enemy was just disappearing around a circular ledge o' rocks.

Before Albert could reply, a hubbub arose from

the direction in which he had left his companions, followed by the whip-like crack of a rifle.

"My friends are in trouble!" exclaimed Arlington hurriedly. "Secrete yourself here, while I go to their relief. I will return for you!"

He bounded toward the spot, and reached it a moment after, to find half a dozen horses held fast by his three companions. But not an enemy was in sight.

"There wasn't only one Indian, and he pretty near run over us!" exclaimed Will, as Albert came up. "Ranty popped away at him, and he slid off his horse and departed, 'where the woodbine twineth' I guess. Hello!"

He broke off suddenly, for there stood Madge, and behind her, Flo and old Abe!

"By Nero's fiddle, boys, I'm struck all of a heap! I'm 'stonished like blazes. Oh, Lordy, ain't I though? This are better nor roast buffler-hump. How *did* ye all git here?"

"Walked," responded Ranty, laconically.

Old Abe removed the glazed cap that adorned his head, and ran his rough, horny fingers through his grizzly locks. He had suddenly remembered that some sort of introduction was expected, for the boys stood gazing at his two fair companions unable to keep their gaze from them.

"Boys," he said at last. "this 'ere big girl is Miss Madge Lennox, an' this t'other little one is Florrie Stanley. Gals, this chap here is Albert Arlington, a dern'd good boy, an' captain of this 'ere band, an' these three t'other ones is his subjects," and the trapper named over the three blushing young hunters. "Now, that ain't 'cordin' to regulations, I s'pose, but it's the best old Abe can do, so go at it an' git acquainted," and the trapper replaced his cap and stared at them as if for a wager.

"Not a hard thing to do," responded Albert. "But I am anxious to know of your adventures. I just had the good fortune to rescue Miss Lennox, and would like to know how she fell into the savage's hands."

"I am almost ashamed to tell, it was done so foolishly," replied Madge. "We were both under the protection of Uncle Abe—as he has requested us to call him—and this morning at just daylight I awoke and found him gone. I of course knew he was not far away, and as Flo was asleep, I thought I would walk about a little, and while doing so this savage sprung and caught me before I saw him. I had taken the precaution to pocket my revolvers, and when he was carrying me to his horse, I fired at him, but he struck my hand away and I missed. Then I called for help, thinking Uncle Abe would hear me. He fortunately did, but too late to rescue me. For that I am indebted to Mr. Arlington."

Old Abe was listening intently to Madge and had not even glanced toward the horses. What was his surprise when he did, to see Flo, with her arms about the neck of one, and to hear her call it "Bessie," while Ranty was standing by talking and explaining as volubly as though he had been acquainted for years, instead of minutes. And then as the trapper's eyes wandered over the rest of the horse-group, an exclamation of surprise escaped his lips. They were the identical ones he was taking to the young hunters when he first discovered Madge and Flo. It will be remembered that he had taken them to a spot, intending to leave them till after he should guide the girls to their destination. It was on this spot that they had camped the night before.

"There were only two of the Indians, I think," said Madge, "At least, I saw only one besides the one who captured me. He had all the horses but mine, and was attempting to get him, when my captor called to him to desist."

A "council of war" was immediately held by the male members of the band, while Madge and Flo sat near the horses on the roots of a shady tree. Half an hour after, the five came over where they were.

"We've concluded ter move *right away*," explained the old hunter. "Them two p'isen varmints 'll

spread the news o' us all over, an' then we'll find warmer times than we'll want. We've all got horses now, an' we can eat going along. They's pervision 'nough in the saddle-bags. So we'll git ready to onc't."

And fifteen minutes after they were on the march, under old Abe's guidance. And then experiences were exchanged and adventures recounted, as they rode along under the hazy sky.

CHAPTER XX.

HOME AGAIN!

"TAIN'T no use to fret. *We're caged up*. Maybe we can git out in two days, an' maybe in two weeks; that is pervidin' we keep shady. If we don't, more'n likely we won't git out at all."

And after delivering himself of this, old Abe Anderson settled down upon the jutting corner of a boulder, and, with his rifle across his knees, quietly regarded the dismayed faces before him.

This was the third day since the events last recorded. The Indians were now thoroughly awake to the fact that a considerable party of whites were trespassing on their dominions, and parties were scouring in every direction. They had narrowly escaped some of these, and that morning while they were looking for a shelter from a coming storm, which had been brewing for the past two days, they ran unexpectedly upon, and had a sharp fight with one of these parties. They had come out conquerors, but some of the Indians had escaped, and these would of course spread the news of their whereabouts to their companions.

Taking this view of the case Abe Anderson, as "captain," at once led the party to one of his retreats in the mountains. It was a dark, secluded ravine, with rocky banks, in which were numerous caves and grottoes, in one of which they had taken refuge.

The three days of companionship and danger, had acquainted the young people as much as months of ordinary intercourse.

The horses which the trapper had taken so much pains to secure for our young hunters had been accepted without any qualms of conscience, for old Abe assured them that they were not of as much value as the furs, traps and horses which the Indians had stolen from him at different times.

After the information imparted by the old trapper, every one was silent for a full minute. Albert was the first to speak.

"I can be content here for an indefinite period," he said, glancing at Madge who sat near. "I don't know what the opinion of the rest is concerning the matter."

"Humph," muttered Ranty, in an aside to Flo. "He looks right at Madge as if she was all the one there was here."

Madge heard the low-spoken words, and her cheeks were suffused with blushes, not so much it must be confessed at them, as at her hero's ardent gaze.

"It's raining like suds," announced Will Macdonald, putting his head out the cave entrance an instant. "It's my humble opinion they won't track us very much. And in view thereof, with plenty to eat as a proviso, I'll be contented for a month if necessary rather than depart while the ander-jibba-ways inhabit this immediate vicinity."

"He means the aborigines," explained Fred, apologetically glancing at the rest. "His education has been sadly neglected."

"You keep still," admonished Will, from a dark corner of the room.

"Wal," said old Abe, rising and stretching himself, "I'm goin' out ter see if the hosses is all right fer the night, and I kin eat a pound slice of roasted buffler when I come back."

And with this gentle hint, he crawled through the entrance, to the thick bushes that grew about it, where he took a long survey of the surroundings. But nothing met his eye save the long, slanting lines of rain and the dripping boughs.

It was growing quite dusk when he reached the spot where the horses were. It was well sheltered from observation from all points and contained a plentiful supply of grass for several days.

The trapper passed among them, giving each a word or pat, and after seeing that they were all secure, returned to the cave.

The appetizing odor of roasting meat greeted him at the entrance, and despite their surrounding dangers, it was a happy company that gathered about the large, flat boulder they had improvised as a table.

Nothing happened worthy of record during the next three days. It rained the greater part of the time, and none ventured any distance outside, except old Abe, and he only very early in the morning or just at night. On this last day he came in quite late, and when they had all gathered about their supper, he said:

"Wal, boys and gals, the promised time hez come. I've diskivered sum'thin', an' ter-morrer we'll move."

All were anxious to hear what the "sum'thin'" was, and the trapper went on:

"I run right spat onter that Warner an' a lot of reds to-night. They were confabin' under some rocks, an' so I crawled up an' listened. An' then one says to t'other, 'Thought I heerd su'thin',' an' then they all listened, but I kept stiller'n a scart coyote; an' presently Warner goes on ter say that he didn't believe we's anywhar 'bout here, 'cos why, a red had jest come from further up the river, and hed see'd some whites up thar that he wereooty sure war us. An' then they pulled up stakes and slid out, an' the las' thing I heerd war that they's goin' ter start airy in the mornin' for these other fellers, so all we've got ter do is to pack up our duds an' emigrate."

It was welcome news, and at daylight the following morning they were astir.

"We want to go by the cave, and get our things, don't we?" Ranty asked, as he strapped his blanket to his horse's back.

"Yes," answered Albert. "We shall probably lose them if we don't. We are all agreed that we have had enough of adventure, and have voted on a return to the settlements, and thence home. Who knows whether we will ever be in these parts again? Abe will come back, though. He says it is his intention to spend the autumn in trapping. So why not leave them for him?"

"Oh, Lordy, boys—" began the old trapper, in an expostulating tone. But Albert's idea struck such a responsive chord in his companions, that they overruled the old hunter's objections before he could utter them, and the traps, furs and accouterments left in the cavern up the river were willed unanimously to him "to have and hold forevermore." Which last clause of course emanated from Ranty's glib tongue.

So it was settled; and the party took up their line of march. Old Abe and the "captain" took the lead, Madge and Flo came next, and Ranty, Fred and Will brought up the rear. But the day was dark and lowering, and along toward noon the warning drops proved that their three days' rain was not yet ended.

"I hate this putterin' 'round in the dust," remarked old Abe, as they went into camp an hour later and he commenced "clawing" about among the dripping undergrowth in a search for something dry with which to start a fire. "If it would only rain a little to kinder dampen things up."

"I would willingly part with some of the surplus moisture hanging about me," laughed Albert, as he assisted Madge to alight. "But it is slackening up and the clouds are breaking. Who knows but what the balance of the day may be fine?"

So it proved, and when night fell they had put many miles between them and their noon camp.

"Wal, boys," said the old trapper the next morning, "if we have good luck, three o'clock to-day

we'll strike Kibby's tradin'-post. How does that make the gals feel?"

"Encouraged at least," answered Madge. "But I believe, in her heart, Flo wishes we could have a little brush with the Indians again!"

"We may before night whether I wish it or not," Flo answered, gravely.

At ten o'clock Abe Anderson, who was a little in advance, rode back and said:

"We can't go any further this way, boys. They's more'n fifty reds camped right over the hill, an' Warner's among 'em. They won't be no peace for nary a white till that cuss is put out of the way."

There was nothing for it but to make a "detour. But before they had gone a quarter of a mile, the sharp detonations of a score of rifles burst on the air, followed by wild yells and more shots; all in the direction of the savages.

"Som'thin's run a-foul of them, by mighty!" exclaimed Abe. "An' the whole bizness is movin' this way, sure's yer born. Git under cover quick!"

He forced his horse into the thick undergrowth, followed closely by the rest. And an instant after a large party of terrified Indians came dashing past, some mounted, others on foot, but all fleeing at their topmost speed. And behind came a score or more of mounted whites, firing as they ran. But just as they came opposite where our friends were, a loud, commanding voice halted them, and the trapper and his companions rode forth.

"Ah! who have we here?" exclaimed the commander. And then as he caught a plainer view of the trapper, he continued: "By my soul, if it ain't old Abe Anderson!" and he hastened forward to shake the grizzled hunter by the hand.

It was a cordial meeting, for the two were old friends. And then Abe introduced his companions.

"We are now on our way to Kibby's post, and very glad of your company we shall be," said Captain Travers. "We were not as cautious as we should have been, for the Indians attacked us before we saw them. However, we killed some of their number and put the rest to flight without any loss ourselves."

They returned to the scene of the attack, and the captain ordered the men to bury the dead Indians.

"Look-a-here!" suddenly exclaimed Ranty, who was poking about among the dead bodies. "If here isn't that scamp, Warner, dead enough too, I'll warrant!"

They rolled him over; his limbs were already stiff.

"He's no deader'n he ought ter be," avowed Abe. "He's done mischief 'nough, an' it's a good thing."

They buried him with the rest and then the whole party continued on their course, and while the sun was some distance above the horizon the walls of Kibby's post came in sight.

"It seems good to see a civilized habitation again," confessed Madge, as they alighted at the gates.

The inmates gave them a warm welcome, and several days passed pleasantly under its roof. Our company was alone in one of the rooms one morning when old Abe came in.

"Yer all safe an' sound now," he remarked, seating himself on a camp-stool, "an' I've about made up my mind ter go back to the hunting-grounds."

A moment's silence followed.

"I want a little conversation with you," said Albert, rising, "and I think I can persuade you from the notion of returning now."

The two went out together, but in five minutes they were back, but just before they reached the door our party heard the trapper say:

"Wal, by thunder! I'm 'mazed all to pieces, an' I can't git over it."

And he did certainly look mystified as he came in, but he went straight up to Madge, and shook hands as heartily as though he hadn't seen her in months. And for an instant Madge's face was flushed with the tell-tale blood till it was a vivid scarlet.

"Oh, Lordy!" exclaimed Abe, as he saw it. "I co'ldn't blush like that if I war goin' ter get married forty times! Youngsters," continued the old hunter, waving his cap, and addressin' society in general, "youngsters, I've got an invite to a weddin', an' it's the fu'st one this 'coon ever had, an' I'll kick a toe at it if I don't catch a beaver fer a year. Oh, Lordy! jest to think! But I tell you, it's the most 'tonishin' thing!"

"I should think it was," returned Ranty, in an injured tone. "Here, we've campaigned together amouz the Indians, and run numberless chances of not getting eat up, and now he's been getting ready to get married, and that, too, without saying a word of his intentions to his bosom friends and fellows in distress! I never heard of such a proceeding!"

"I told Madge," plead Albert in a penitent tone.

This raised a general laugh, in which blushing Madge joined.

"Home at last! Oh, how good it seems!"

It was Madge Lennox who uttered the words, as she looked at A'bert, who rode by her side. And close behind them Ranty, Will, Fred, Flo, and the old trapper.

They had halted in front of a large, beautiful house surrounded by spacious grounds, and a moment after were dismounting at its gates.

I will skip the joyous meeting that followed. And Mrs. Lennox listened with bated breath while Madge related their adventures, and thanked Heaven in her heart that her darling had come through them unscathed. The two weeks that followed were filled with contentment for the whole company, and espe-

cially so to Albert and Madge, who dreamed away the bright, sunny days in perfect happiness. Old Abe had been taken in hand by our young hunters before reaching the mansion, and he now walked about cleanly shaven, his hair trimmed and a "civilized" suit of clothes, in place of his trapper-costume.

The wedding of Albert and Madge which followed took place at her own home in presence of the family and a few guests. Old Abe participated in the joyousness of the occasion, and danced with the bride, putting in a variety of steps, to the amusement of all.

But the time for parting came. Old Abe must go back to the frontier, but before he went, our four boy-hunters purchased a rifle and side-arms of the most approved pattern, and presented them to the surprised and delighted old trapper, amid an imposing ceremony, and a speech from Albert.

"But it's only lent, you know," Ranty said, while the good-byes were being spoken. "Albert's married, to be sure, but we three ain't, and by and by we are coming out there to trap and hunt again, and Flo is coming out to get lost, and you will have to be guide again to get her back safe—with us to help, of course, and I intend to be the hero at the winding up of the affair!"

Which caused a general laugh of course, and also caused Flo to blush very prettily in her confusion.

Will Macdonald, Ranty, and Fred returned to their respective homes, Albert and Madge settled down into a happy, contented married pair, and old Abe returned to the plains to follow his old vocation of trapping and hunting. And thus to each and all we say good-by.

THE END.

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